

CONFERENCE REPORT

2021 Online Conference for Music Therapy (OCMT21)

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CONFERENCE DETAILS

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Alison Talmage is a New Zealand registered music therapist, originally from the UK. She has worked with people with diverse needs across the lifespan, and currently focuses on community music therapy and community singing for adults with neurogenic communication difficulties. Alison is a doctoral candidate at the University of Auckland. [alison.talmage@auckland.ac.nz]

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Virtual conferences have become second nature in the pandemic, but this tenth anniversary OCMT21 (Online Conference for Music Therapy, <https://onlineconferenceformusictherapy.com>) highlights that some music therapists pioneered digital events well before COVID-19. OCMT is a not-for-profit organisation offering an annual conference, other short symposia, purchase of archived recordings, and consultation with other music therapy organisations planning online events. At the helm is an impressive international Board of Directors – Faith Alverson-Ramos (CO, USA), Aksana Kavaliova-Moussi (Canada, formerly Bahrain), Mary Jane Landaker (KS, USA), Michelle Sieben (MN, USA), Natalie Jack (Australia), and John Lawrence (Canada).

The OCMT21 conference hosted an excellent programme of one-hour presentations over a continuous 24-hour period on February 6th (depending on the time zone from which you accessed the sessions). I imagined the conference as a giant Mexican wave progressing around the world, with music therapists tuning in and out as their time zones came online. Before registering, I considered potential information overload and Zoom fatigue, but a big draw card was the opportunity to watch some presentations live and to access other recordings later. Audience pacing was also helped by the planned 15-minute break between sessions. Recordings were available to attendees for a month, and although this is the norm, I wondered whether a month was long enough. Here in the southern hemisphere we spend February juggling the demands of the new academic year while still wanting to enjoy the height of summer, so I did not manage to view quite everything.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, February 6th is Waitangi Day, the annual commemoration of our country's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi – a day of politics, history, cultural events, and reflection. I recalled that I had spent Waitangi Day 2020 in Australia, when the world was then preoccupied with bushfires, climate issues and the international refugee crisis, and only beginning to pay attention to COVID-19. This year I am mindful that our life here, with little community transmission of the virus, is a privilege not enjoyed by most of the rest of the world. In this context I attended the

conference hoping for reflections on the role and resilience of music therapists and music therapy participants in challenging sociocultural contexts across the world.

Two keynotes headed a programme of high quality presentations. Amy Clements-Cortés discussed music therapy in end-of-life care – I wish more New Zealand music therapists had attended this conference as palliative care is a slowly expanding area of practice here. As a consequence of New Zealand's End of Life Choice Act (Ministry of Health, 2020) music therapists working in palliative care may need to consider this new dimension of end-of-life care. As in all areas of practice, music therapists' willingness to discuss and publish on this issue will provide valuable collegial support. Vicky Abad's keynote, "The Economics of Therapy during Challenging Times", focused on business strategies and in-person and online service delivery, but also highlighted the importance of therapist wellbeing and team connectedness during and beyond the pandemic.

As OCMT issues an open call for submissions, with no central theme, the programme content was diverse in terms of populations served, music therapy methods, forms of evidence, and presentation styles. The vast scope of work reported included neonatal intensive care (NICU), special education, residential programmes for adults with intellectual disability, refugee programmes with a social justice slant, cancer care, and end-of-life and bereavement care. I appreciated Carlin McLellan's Soundtrap app workshop, and the philosophically congruent online teaching of online tools.

A presentation that particularly resonated me was a panel discussion from Elizabeth Coombes, Grace Thompson and Gustavo Gattino, about online professional communities such as the Music Therapy and Autism Network Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/591750845076918>). This prompted me to pause and reflect on the function and form of my own participation in several digital communities of practice, providing rich professional connections, new learning, and sometimes challenging discussions. These ongoing relationships and conversations complement conferences and webinars, and perhaps further online special interest practitioner groups will emerge.

The conference programme featured presenters from North America (6 USA, 4 Canadian), Europe (5, including one Mexican music therapist working in Germany), Australia (3, although one discussed experience in Europe), and one international panel discussion. The majority of presenters seemed to be white women – not unusual in our profession, but perhaps future OCMT organisers could be more proactive in giving a platform to other voices. I wondered about audience demographics and how attendee evaluation might influence conference programmes year on year. Some online events also offer simultaneous translation in selected languages – for example, the 2020 Asia Pacific Community Music Conference offered English, Cantonese and Mandarin translation. While no conference can cater for everyone, perhaps simultaneous translation into English could be considered for as a strategy to increase presenter diversity, rather than requiring presentation in English. Although this might be costly, perhaps a limited trial could be considered, to gauge interest. Perhaps also, when vacancies arise, consideration could be given to increasing the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Board, to enrich existing expertise. Supplementing recordings with presentation transcripts (even if only in English) might also make the conference more accessible and truly international. I also applaud the presentations that offered live captioning, a strategy to increase accessibility. To date this has been a challenging and time-consuming service to offer, but an important consideration for all future online event providers.

While we are all dreaming of post-pandemic events and meeting together in person, online conferences continue to provide valuable online connections. The success of OCMT over ten years may well have been a factor in persuading other conference hosts of the possibility and potential of digital conferences. I hope that the proliferation of online events will not become a competition, but will continue to provide new opportunities for professional learning, international support, and dissemination of practice. And remember that in music therapy circles this trend probably started here at OCMT.

Correction notes: The author implemented a correction in her biography after the initial publication of the paper. The corrected version was published on 14th May 2021.

REFERENCES

Ministry of Health. (2020). *End of Life Choice Act*. <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/regulation-health-and-disability-system/end-life-choice-act>