

BOOK REVIEW

The use of voice in music therapy (Meashey)

Reviewed by Patricia Winter

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REVIEWER BIOGRAPHY

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As the reviewer of this book, I would be remiss if I did not situate myself in relation to the author. I met Meashey in 1999 as a graduate student at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA. I also came to know Meashey as a well-established Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) fellow with a robust practice in the city. Over the years, I have come to know Meashey as a deeply intuitive musician and music therapist; connected, attuned, thoughtful, and grounded in the art and practice. When I saw that she had written a book about clinical voice, I was eager to read it, and to position myself not only as a university professor tasked with teaching clinical voice, but as a music therapist, and as a classically trained vocalist.

This 250-page text reads like a conversation between the reader and the author. There is a professional tone and a clear commitment to fully uncover the myriad ways that one can use the voice in music therapy, yet it is accessible and personal. Meashey writes for readers with varying degrees of confidence and competence with singing. She offers techniques and strategies for more novice music therapists while ensuring that the writing is not off-putting for more advanced singers, or seasoned music therapists. The text is appropriate for the music therapy classroom and is a great addition to an undergraduate clinical voice class or a graduate level voice class. This book is also an excellent resource for music therapy professionals who wish to continue to develop their singing voice and are looking for new techniques, session ideas, and theoretical approaches for clinical singing. Throughout, Meashey shares her personal experiences with using music to address her own experiences with anxiety and stage fright. These well-placed self-disclosures feel like she is giving the reader permission to look inward to uncover the challenges that can be faced when singing. Meashey highlights the ways that singing is an essential therapeutic approach for clients but can also be implemented to address challenges faced by singers. In Chapter 3, Meashey broaches the topic of burnout, sharing that she has had moments of resistance and struggle while singing. Her choice to positioning the possibility of burnout early in the text seems meaningful and important.

Meashey's commitment to clinical work can be observed throughout the book as every chapter and section is full of rich and relevant clinical examples, establishing and highlighting her extensive clinical experiences and granting her status as an expert on the topic. What is most beautiful and refreshing about this text is that it is wholly and completely about singing in a music therapy context. Meashey writes about clients, relationships, collaboration, and the importance of understanding both the context of the client and of the therapist in order to implement singing for clinical outcomes. She recognises that singing in a music therapy session is at times not as aesthetic as it is in a performance situation. Within the first seven chapters she focuses on the needs of music therapists and engages in an open dialogue about situations that may contribute to feelings of fear and intimidation for music therapists who are singing with clients. Throughout she assures the reader that if one is working in collaboration with the client to address clinical goals, then implementing a variety of vocal techniques and sounds are indicated even if they do not meet defined aesthetic standards. Meashey offers an example from a client who was non-verbal with severe mental disabilities who cried and wailed. Meashey's approach was to cry and wail along with the client as she joined the client's world. "I wailed with her. It felt agonising, but I couldn't ignore Susie's plea" (p. 31).

It is evident that client and music are the focus of this book as Meashey provides song suggestions, quotes from songs, examples of how music was implemented in sessions, and examples of music composed by the author for clinical use. These musical examples will be quite familiar to a music therapist practicing in the U.S., and are representative examples of western, pop, jazz, and folk-music. While there are a few examples of non-Western types of songs, these songs are fairly traditional within music therapy practice in the U.S. and have been adopted as non-Western standards within American culture. International and Non-Western users may have to extrapolate a repertoire that is appropriate for the context and culture of their clients.

Of particular note is Chapter 7, which has a focus on the *ethics of self-awareness*. Meashey identifies that "we want to be taken seriously, and we also have a responsibility to approach each session with serious focus, to respect the tenderness of the relationship, and to value the trust our clients have placed in us to keep them safe" (p. 66). In line with ethical thinking, she emphasises that clinicians should seek guidance from professionals by doing our own personal work in therapy, by getting supervision when we are challenged, by finding a vocal teacher to continue our development, and by committing to self-care.

While not part of the ethics chapter, Meashey begins the journey into clinical session planning and therapeutic decision making with a discussion on the importance of "establishing and maintaining safety [...] for every single session" (p. 81). She concludes the chapter by assuring music therapists that wherever they are in their development as a singer, there are an abundance of opportunities to learn, grow, and create. Meashey shares from her experiences as a professional jazz singer by outlining a levels system that is analogous to studying jazz. These levels can help music therapists conceptualise where they are in relation to their comfort level with singing and their own development as singers. Meashey acknowledges that music therapists will be in very different places with their vocal skills and should work within that skill set to the best of their abilities. Perhaps a music therapist is most comfortable with Level 1: "imitating and reproducing the exact method as written" (p. 87), or perhaps they are ready for Level 4: "getting an idea from reading the method and creating a brand-new method" (p. 87).

Chapters 11 through 20 highlight the use of voice across a variety of orientations to practice, from a cognitive behavioural framework to more depth-focused approaches such as psychotherapy and mandala work. There does not appear to be a hierarchy of approaches nor methods, nor one way of thinking that is favoured over any other type of thinking. Meashey provides clinical examples, vocal exercises, and experiences that address all domains of functioning including physical, cognitive, social, self-expression, and communication. Across the entirety of the text there is an impressive amount of differentiated vocal experiences offering numerous options for music therapy practitioners, and never once does it appear that she is outside of the bounds of her expertise.

Within the past six-months the COVID-19 crisis has had a significant impact on the way that music therapy services are delivered. Singers have had much attention directed toward them due to the possibility of spreading the virus while singing. The relatively limited science behind singing during COVID suggests that singing disburses droplets that can contain the virus and therefore singing with others presents a greater risk than speaking (Lund University, 2020). Over the past six-months I have sung less than I have across my entire lifespan. When I sing it is under a cloth mask, with an intimidating plastic face shield. My singing voice is now pressed and compressed, and there is no resonance. I find that my singing is muffled, and I feel like I am yelling all of the time. The way I teach my classes and interact with clients has changed and I am left with a deep and painful sadness as a result of this new reality. Meashey's book, even though written pre-pandemic, is like a soothing balm during this very difficult time. Her practical applications for singing that include humming and noticing physical sensations that occur (p. 3), to the use of songs to address emotional pain, anxiety, depression, and grief (p. 148) seem even more relevant as music therapists are relearning how to do the job of providing therapy both in person and virtually via telehealth. Meashey writes "songs as containers for emotion are quite versatile in their ability to hold a plethora of subtle and complicated textures, which can stay constant or shift like the tide" (p. 148). Whether standing on the shore or in the shifting tide, singing is both necessary for our clients and for us as music therapists and this message is clearly and passionately articulated by the author.

REFERENCES

Lund University. (2020). Could singing spread COVID-19? *ScienceDaily*. www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/09/200908101621.htm