

## CONFERENCE REPORT

# The 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Music Therapy 'Music therapists: Reflecting, connecting and innovating in the global community'

**Elizabeth Coombes**

University of South Wales, UK

### CONFERENCE DETAILS

The 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Music Therapy:

'Music therapists: Reflecting, connecting and innovating in the global community'

24-29 July 2023, Canada

### AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**Dr Elizabeth Coombes** is the course leader of the MA Music Therapy at the University of South Wales in the UK. She has a clinical and supervisory practice as well as being an active researcher with interests in music and music therapy with displaced people and intercultural working.

[[elizabeth.coombes@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:elizabeth.coombes@southwales.ac.uk)]

### Publication history:

Submitted 20 Aug 2023

Accepted 17 Sep 2023

First published 10 Oct 2023

This conference was the first World Congress of Music Therapy (WCMT) to be held as an in-person event since the 2017 WCMT took place in Tsukuba, Japan. The 2020 event, scheduled to be held in South Africa at the University of Pretoria, had been held online due to the COVID pandemic. There was therefore a great deal of excitement amongst presenters and attendees alike; the prospect of being able to meet colleagues and friends and share music, and ideas while making new connections in the Canadian city of Vancouver was exciting. This vibrant city with its blend of sea, mountains and innovative architecture seemed the perfect venue for music therapists to gather together once more to explore contemporary music therapy research and practice. On exploring the city, however, it was evident that extreme levels of socioeconomic disparities existed almost side by side in the city. This offered much food for thought, and was something that had echoes in the conference itself in terms of the accessibility and inclusivity of the event.

The setting for the conference, the Vancouver Convention Centre, offered a large number of well-appointed rooms mostly on one level. It was also well located, being on the water and near to many



restaurants and cafes. This was useful as the conference fee did not include lunches. The layout of the centre facilitated movement between sessions which, as there were many, was appreciated. It also made the conference more accessible physically to those with additional needs. I wondered, though if scheduling sessions with more of an eye for discrete themes might have been more user-friendly. For example, there were a number of sessions on dementia practices (e.g., Abe et al., 2023; Kim & Kim, 2023), but these were distributed amongst the programme in general. The sessions often seemed quite randomly allocated between rooms which either meant missing those on a specific subject, or having to move swiftly between locations.

With a stated theme of 'Music Therapists: Reflecting, Connecting and Innovating in the Global Community', there was plenty of room for diverse aspects of music therapy to be shared. Delegates from over 50 countries were represented, which made for representation of a very wide range of music therapy techniques, models and practices. New also to this conference were different presentation options. I appreciated the broadening of formats that included World Café, PechaKucha Fireside Chats and E-posters as ways to share work. Having delivered a World Café at the conference myself with fellow presenters Penny Warren (New Zealand) and Gustavo Gattino (Denmark, Brazil and Portugal), I saw how much attendees appreciated the interactive nature of this method. There was lots of positive feedback about this format; I wondered if the inclusion of music-making as part of the World Café process, perhaps during the final phase of 'harvesting' the data generated during the discussions could be offered in future World Cafés at music therapy conferences. This could add more specificity to this approach as linked to our profession. Equally the Fireside Chat option seemed user friendly, as though one was sitting in on a two-way conversation with opportunities to ask questions. The PechaKucha presentations I attended, however, felt as though those using this mode of presenting had not adhered to the format that this type of presentation requires. PechaKucha are designed as highly visual presentations with minimal text on slides giving the presenter the chance to speak succinctly about the subject. Perhaps this is something to consider in future conferences; I did not notice anyone chairing the various presentations and I felt that it would have been particularly helpful for the PechaKucha presentations to be chaired as several ran over time, impinging on the time slot for others.

One of the highlights of the conference for me was the forefronting of issues relating to cultural sensitivity. There were efforts made throughout the conference to acknowledge the work that is ongoing by the profession to decolonise music therapy practice and education as well as being honest about the challenges we all still face (Baines, 2023; Baines & Sewapagaham, 2023). The opening performance by First Nations musicians and dancers set the scene for this to be a consideration that for me provided an aural and visual underpinning of the conference. My explorations of the presentations, and the city and its environs as well, were made through an awareness of my own ableist, white Eurocentric lens. This was tempered somewhat through my positioning as a female of Welsh origin, enabling me to occupy a minority group in some sense, although still one with substantial privilege. This awareness gave me an appreciation of how far music therapy as a profession has come in the past 20 years or so, and also how far it still has to go. It was disappointing then to see that accessibility of presentation PowerPoint slides, designed by the WCMT for use by presenters, had significant readability issues. It is to be hoped that these matters will be addressed by the next WCMT in 2026 in Bologna, Italy.

In questions posed to the Spotlight Panel “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Music Therapy” the issue of accessibility of the conference in general was raised. One attendee voiced that they felt the conference cost was high and prohibitive to many. It was in-person only with an option to purchase recorded presentations. There was no clear response to this, but it has made me consider the future of international in person only conferences. The costs involved in attending these events can be high, and for those who are self-funding can be prohibitive. I suggest that a hybrid format, with live online presence is a way forward. This has been successfully implemented in other events. With this option, an opportunity is given for people to attend synchronously as well as potentially access recordings. Furthermore, the use of a conference App where networking is possible online as well as in person would help build that sense of community and connectivity that such events provide

The experience I will take away from this long-awaited event is one of being enriched by the sheer range of subject matter showcased in Vancouver. Perspectives on music therapy practice and research ranging from psychodynamic and music-centred approaches to medical music therapy and specifically the anti-oppressive practice and pedagogy initiatives nourished me, providing food for thought as I return to my own practice and teaching. Some of the presentations are available as recordings to watch for a short while. This is something that I will certainly utilise as I digest the learning and experiences from this event and refresh my own practice.

## REFERENCES

- Abe, M., Tabei, K., & Satoh, M. (2023). What are the measures and outcomes used in music therapy for dementia? In J. Yip & J. P. Zambonini (Eds.), Proceedings of the 17th World Congress of Music Therapy. *Special Issue of Music Therapy Today* 18(1), 22-24. <https://www.wfmt.info/music-therapy-today>
- Baines, S. (2023). Diversity, equity and inclusion in music therapy. In J. Yip & J. P. Zambonini (Eds.), Proceedings of the 17th World Congress of Music Therapy. *Special Issue of Music Therapy Today* 18(1), 180. <https://www.wfmt.info/music-therapy-today>
- Baines, S., & Sewapagaham, S. (2023). Pathways to decolonizing music therapy. In J. Yip & J. P. Zambonini (Eds.), Proceedings of the 17th World Congress of Music Therapy. *Special Issue of Music Therapy Today* 18(1), 187. <https://www.wfmt.info/music-therapy-today>
- Kim, S.Y., & Kim, S.J. (2023). Telehealth music therapy for the elderly at risk of dementia. In J. Yip & J. P. Zambonini (Eds.), Proceedings of the 17th World Congress of Music Therapy. *Special Issue of Music Therapy Today* 18(1), 80-81. <https://www.wfmt.info/music-therapy-today>