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PREVERBAL AND NONVERBAL MUSICALITY

Musical interventions for nonverbal children and adults with severe disabilities

*Reviewed by dr. Jeska Buhmann, dr. Micheline Lesaffre,
dr. Luc Nijs, and Prof. Dr. Ir. Leon van Noorden*

GENERAL

From the perspective of music and wellbeing in people with severe disabilities, this is a valuable and interesting textbook. The author L. Tiszai has integrated well-established traditional approaches to infant research and innate human musicality with new work in the expanding fields of music and wellbeing and embodied music interaction. The book is intended for learners who may have little or no experience reading professional international journals, but would benefit from a substantial research base in understanding how these emerging areas can contribute to working with nonverbal children and adults with severe disabilities.

The book is organized into eight chapters. The first half of the book focuses on the theoretical background; the second half is dedicated to practice. The subject matter is accurate and has an appropriate reading level for the students who will be using the material. The book has been written in a style that will hold the student's attention; the end-of-chapter questions will be interesting for the learners.

To conclude her textbook on musical interventions for nonverbal children and adults with severe disabilities, L. Tiszai pleads for a fair and unbiased treatment of various groups in society. In doing so she motivates learners to acknowledge the importance of inclusive communities, where the needs and talents of the most vulnerable members of society are taken in consideration.

PART I: THEORY

CH1: How to Approach Individuals with Severe Disabilities (*Micheline Lesaffre*)

In the first chapter an interesting overview is given of approaches and problems encountered working with individuals with severe disabilities. This is supported with enriching examples of inadequacy of standard testing and observations

of people with unexpected reactions in the author's own practice. Attention is given to aspects of social context and different models of social inclusion. Thereby, the author is focusing on the importance of rethinking existing approaches in order to value and enhance the quality of life of people with severe disabilities.

CH2: Communication, Vitality Affects and Quality of Life (*Luc Nijs*)

Chapter 2 introduces the concept of 'vitality affects' as introduced by Daniel Stern. This concept is very interesting, because it captures a basic element in human communication and expressiveness. But this concept is also very useful to the whole approach that the author presents in her book. It prepares very well the chapter on communicative musicality. The author gives a good overview of Stern's affect theory.

Moreover, she adds relevant other literature such as the work of Trevarthen, or Gratier & Magnier. It is also well structured, moving from Stern's account towards its application in music therapy time-based arts.

CH3: Communicative Musicality (*Luc Nijs*)

Building on the previously introduced concept of vitality affects, the author further elaborates on the expressive non-verbal interaction between individuals and introduces Malloch's concept of 'communicative musicality'. Starting from the basic elements, the author elaborates on human communication in function of building a common culture. This chapter elaborates then on the link between musical interaction and communication, providing the reader with the relevant literature, although there is dominance by the work of Gratier & Magnier.

CH4: Music, Bodily Experience and Cognitive Development (*Leon van Noorden*)

This chapter discusses the theories about how a living organism can learn to react in a meaningful way to sound stimuli at gradually higher levels of involvement and complexity. In order to describe the link between an external stimulus like music and a notion of what this means for its being, an organism is said to have a certain degree of cognition. To express the understanding that this link is to a large extent determined by the characteristics of the body of the organism one uses the term "embodied cognition". Several levels of engagement of the organism with sound can be distinguished: such as synchronisation of movement to basic pulsation in the sound, embodied attuning to more complex patterns and empathy to the overall qualities of the sound stream. All these levels require from the organism that it can perceive regularities in the sound and predict the upcoming salient moments so that it can coordinate its actions with the sound, what would not be possible if it would only show reactions to some conspicuous events in the sound stream.

At a still higher level of cognition an organism can talk about its bodily reactions and feelings and communicate this to its peers. However words can never describe fully what ones feels. In the context of the furthering of wellbeing of severely handicapped people with only a very little command of language it is very important to distinguish these two realms of cognition. Several therapies that take this into considerations are presented.

CH5: Psychophysiology of Music. The Effect of Music on the Human Body and Nervous System (*Leon van Noorden*)

This chapter goes deeper into the description of the internal communication mechanisms and pathways inside the human body and discusses how these mechanisms can establish a motivation for developing embodied cognition. Music can be considered as a drug. The body likes, wants and learns to obtain it. In order to get this circuit started the external stimulus has to “speak” to a manifold of senses and bodily actuators like ears, eyes, tactile senses, legs, arms, hands, torso, head, voice, etc. each with its own resonance frequency. In music many of these frequencies are present simultaneously and in alternation. It will depend upon the disabilities which signals can be perceived or not. Learning takes place though neurons that fire at the same moment. The link between external and internal stimuli is discussed under Sensory Integration. There are some basic pathways in the in the body that control the overall behaviour of the organism that are important for survival in adverse environments, the Autonomic Nervous System. It prepares the organism for action or relaxation. These reactions can be seen in all people, but for severely handicapped people they can be the starting point for beneficial therapies. Several of these therapies are presented.

PART II: PRACTICE

CH6: The role of Acoustic Environment Safe on the Sense of Security
(*Micheline Lesaffre*)

Chapter 6 discusses the challenges people with severe disabilities face in processing sensory information coming from the acoustic environment (going from noise to background music). The idea of Leitmotifs, or small structural musical units processing thematic identities, is introduced and elaborated in context of special education. Based on that idea an acoustic schedule with different levels of complexity is established. Acoustic schedule levels start from singing, whistling or playing melodies of well-known children’s songs. More complex acoustic schedules consist of a variation of different elements such as natural sounds, short motifs and songs. The advantage of singing familiar tunes for creating an optimal environment is highlighted.

CH7: Enjoyment Found in Classical Music: The Method of Klára Kokas*(Jeska Buhmann)*

In chapter 7 the importance is stressed for caregivers of persons with severe disability to be creative in offering recreational activities. Rather than offering passive leisure time, caregivers are encouraged to involve patients in activities they enjoy to benefit their social and personal development. The method of Klára Kokas, based on repeated listening of certain selected pieces of classical music, is described. This method promotes musical understanding and sharing by means of bodily movements, thus providing a nonverbal way of communication, which seems to be especially relevant for nonverbal persons. Some adaptations to the Kokas method are proposed in order to better suit the needs of (mostly nonverbal) persons with severe disabilities. Experiences with this adapted approach are discussed and the need to personalize the approach depending on individual patient's needs is stressed.

CH8: Orchestral Work and Community Music Therapy. The Consonante Method*(Micheline Lesaffre)*

In the last chapter the principles of the Consonante Method are explained. The author developed the method to meet the need to make musical participation possible for people with severe disabilities. This method incorporates vitality affects and automatic synchronization to establish togetherness. Examples are given of how a search is made for usable instruments, or how existing instruments are adapted to suit the physical abilities of the musicians. The willingness to give public performances and even interactive concerts resulted in the formation of an orchestra called Nádizumzum. The process of becoming an orchestra member is illustrated with some cases that show the importance of spontaneous movement patterns to music for choosing appropriate instruments. This approach is supported by a discussion of the theoretical background on musical gestures. As far as the repertoire is concerned the author stresses the advantages of using folk songs and typical folk instruments. Furthermore, the process of attuning is considered with a focus on interpersonal synchrony and communicative musicality in relation to social isolation as a consequence of severe disabilities. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the positive effect of organizing workshops and inclusive concerts not only for the members of the orchestra but also for the participating audience.