



## Music therapy and social justice: A personal journey

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the emergent trend of social justice in music therapy as evidenced across practice, research, and theory. The diverse nature and scope of social justice is reviewed from such varied perspectives as: feminist music therapy, community music therapy, peace activism, and participatory action research, as well as multicultural and empowerment approaches to music therapy. The author's personal journey in social justice is outlined as it unfolds in both personal and professional dimensions, including work in community music therapy with adults with developmental disabilities and work in feminist music therapy with survivors of violence.

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### Music therapy and social justice: a personal journey

Until recently, music therapy literature has been sparse in terms of issues related to social justice (Ng, 2005). There is now, however, an emergent trend that reflects growing interest in this area from divergent music therapy perspectives, an interest evidenced across practice, research, and theory. These divergent perspectives, which incorporate social justice issues either explicitly or implicitly, include feminist music therapy and community music therapy as well as multicultural and empowerment approaches to music therapy (Curtis, 2006; Faire & Langan, 2004; Hadley, 2006; Pavlicevik & Ansdell, 2004; Silverman, 2009; Stige, 2002; Vaillancourt, 2007, 2010). Other areas include work of music therapists directly involved in peace activism as well as those involved in participatory action research (Hunt, 2005; Ng, 2005).

The particular social justice focus of these diverse approaches varies between both the approaches and the individual music therapists. For some, the focus is peace activism (Ng, 2005; Vaillancourt, 2010) or ecology (Faire & Langan, 2004). For others, feminist music therapy has an explicit focus on social justice work specifically for women and all other peoples marginalized by unjust socio-political systems (Curtis, 2008; Hadley, 2006). Many within the community music therapy framework place a focus on social justice for their particular clientele (Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Pavlicevik & Ansdell, 2004). This can also be the nature of those conducting participatory action research in music therapy (Hunt, 2005).

Just as the social justice focus varies among approaches, so does the context of the work: Where does the work take place (e.g., in the clinic, in the community, locally or globally)? Who undertakes the work (e.g., the client, the therapist, alone or in some

combination)? What is the nature of the work (e.g., personal, interpersonal, political, or some combination)? This also varies both between approaches and within approaches. While many have an implicit understanding about the focus and context of their social justice work, feminist therapy, and as a consequence feminist music therapy, have explicit expectations and requirements established for their practitioners (Morrow, Hawxhurst, Montes de Vegas, Abousleman, & Castañeda, 2006). This will be explored in more detail later in this paper.

It is important to note that neither the focus nor the context of the social justice work as outlined above is mutually exclusive; depending on the therapist and the approach, there can be considerable overlap. Vaillancourt (2010), for example, examined the mentoring of apprentice music therapists for peace and social justice through community music therapy. Similarly, while feminist music therapy often presents work with an explicit focus on social justice for women, children, and other marginalized people, it also can expand to address such global issues as war and the environment with a feminist understanding of their impact on marginalized people worldwide (Curtis, 2000; Morrow et al., 2006).

Some of the music therapy literature reflects the grassroots nature of music therapy social justice work. This should not be surprising given the grass roots nature of such trends as community music therapy, feminist music therapy, and other music therapy approaches (Curtis, 2006; Curtis & Mercado, 2004; Pavlicevik & Ansdell, 2004). In each area, as in social justice work, music therapists have been informally integrating these concepts into their work, doing so independently and for a considerable time prior to any formal representation in the music therapy literature. We have seen this operating in feminist music therapy: "Far removed from the traditional music therapy education and training schools, some music therapists are informing their practice with principles of feminism and feminist therapy practice" (Curtis, 2008, p. 128). We have also seen it in peace activism: Ng (2005), through a series

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of interviews with eight music therapists, provides an overview of their peace activist work that evolved independently over time and included work with war trauma survivors alone or in conjunction with direct peace activism. And finally, we have seen it in community therapy: “In presenting a new model of community music therapy, Ansdell (2002) and those who led before provide an opportunity to explore and validate the practice of many of us. They provide a forum for others to think about and present their work, to start a dialogue among all of us whose practice may have had, until now, no name” (Curtis & Mercado, 2004).

Just as other music therapy social justice work has been grounded in a grass roots movement developing outside of academic or professional literature venues, the same can be said about my own personal social justice work. While there is now an emergent institutional trend in music therapy and social justice work, my own journey traces its roots back to my adolescence; from there, it is the personal experiences, inquiries, readings, and influences of friends, family, and life experiences that have informed my understanding and practice of my own social justice work. These would later take me into such professional circles as community engagement, feminist multicultural therapy, and antiviolence work in terms of both my personal and professional lives. An examination follows of that personal journey and the development of my own social justice involvement.

### My personal journey

As a prelude to outlining my personal journey, I feel it is important, as a social justice worker and as a feminist music therapist, to briefly identify the context of that journey—the personal characteristics and background which helped shape my worldview. These have colored my perception of and response to the life experiences which have constituted my journey.

#### My context

My personal context is characterized by the contrast of experiences of privilege and oppression. I am a white, middle class, educated, able-bodied, heterosexual woman born in the mid-1950's. As such, I have experienced certain privileges of dominant group membership such as access to privileged places, people, and resources, including higher education. I have also, however, had the experience of being oppressed as a woman living in a patriarchal culture. For me, it has run the gamut of feeling constrained by gendered career stereotypes to being unable to find myself in any of my readings which only made reference to men and mankind. It is however, my personal experience of (male) violence which has been the most profound (Curtis, 2006, p. 233).

#### The beginning

The beginning of my journey is rooted in my adolescent experiences with peace protests of the 1960's. Music was an integral part of this movement; it reflected and transformed it. It was, as well, my coming of age music. My journey is also rooted in an emerging interest at that time in feminism; this was not an academic interest, but a lived experience, including challenging of the societal patriarchal norms leading to self-directed readings about all things feminist. The influences of my family life in general and of my mother in particular are noteworthy. My mother, in pursuing a nursing career, took one of the few paths open to women at the time. In choosing to have a family and a career (after the children were old enough), she broke the gender stereotypes of her generation, but this alone would not be enough for mine. What is remarkable is that we influenced each other in a dance which came full circle by the end of her life. She set me on a feminist path—in part by what she did and in

part by what she did not do. She also inspired early on in me a love of music. As my journey took me into my own empowerment work, she carefully read written stories about my work and kept news clippings of my social justice demonstrations. Towards the end of her life, her journey took her to a feminist critique of our world and of such patriarchal institutions as organized religion; it also took her to action as a protestor—as part of a weekly silent vigil group and as part of the Kingston (Canada) group of “Raging Grannies.” The Raging Grannies comprise groups of women 50 years and older around the world who are non-partisan, non-violent, community based activists (Narushima, 2004). They use humor, song parodies, and wild attire to accomplish activist aims, adopting Margaret Lawrence's philosophy that “as we grow older, we should become not less radical, but more so” (Acker & Brightwell, 2004, p. 4). In describing their activism, one Raging Grannie commented:

Like court jesters, we would use humour to mock the mighty.  
We would go where we were not invited and sing out loud what  
was not supposed to be said. We would be guerrilla singers and  
we would change the world, so there. (Acker & Brightwell, 2004,  
p. xi).

Upon reflecting on what social justice might sound like, I know that for the Raging Grannies there is no question; the sound would be music comprised of myriad biting, yet humorous protest song parodies. If forced to choose just one, it would have to be “A Gaggle of Grannies.”

A Gaggle of Grannies

[Sung to the tune of Side By Side]

Oh, we're just a gaggle of grannies  
Urging you off your Fannies  
We're telling you boys  
We're sick of your toys  
We want no more war

We know if you tried you could  
Chretien [Canada's then Prime Minister]

Change our country's direction

We're telling you now  
We're angry & how  
We want no more war  
We really mean it  
No more war

We'll say it nicely  
No more war  
We mean precisely  
NO MORE WAR!

[As parodied and sung by the Kingston Grannies, Raging Grannies, 2010].

Certainly the Raging Grannies have been quite successful with their songs and humor in drawing attention to their activism, through media coverage and RCMP scrutiny, through recognition by such celebrities as David Suzuki: “Fearless, courageous, marvelous—these Grannies tell it like it is as few others do. I hope these role models inspire imitators in my gender too” (Acker & Brightwell, p. 219). And so, as a Raging Grannie in her later years, my mother's journey of feminism, activism, and music would influence and be influenced by my own journey (Figs. 1 and 2).

#### Two separate but intertwining strands

Having looked at the beginnings of my social justice journey, rooted as they were in my personal life, I now turn to the part of my journey in which the personal interest in activism moves into my professional work—where the personal is professional, and for both where, in the words of the well-known feminist motto, “the personal is political.” Within my clinical practice, a social justice focus began to emerge in two separate but intertwining strands—community music therapy and feminist music therapy.

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