

**Book Review: Eds. Sunderland N., Bendrups, D. and Bartleet B-L (Eds) (2018) *Music, Health and Wellbeing: Exploring Music for Health Equity and Social Justice*, Palgrave Macmillan.**

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## **Review**

If one searches online, it is possible to find innumerable quotes from a variety of sources bearing the message, and I paraphrase here, that music has the power to change the world for the better. These changes, we are told, emanate from some sort universal language that music and music alone can access. The inference is that there are qualities in music itself that make it uniquely suited to mysteriously work in this way. As a community musician and music therapist with over twenty years experience of practice at home in Wales and abroad, I cannot deny that I too hold strong beliefs about the benefits of music and music-making. Personal and professional experience as well as research have provided me with evidence that engagement in music-based activities can indeed bring a range of benefits to a wide variety of people in different situations and locations.

This text, containing a wealth of information from a range of contributors goes some way to explaining how and why the above claims may be true. More importantly, the rich and diverse backgrounds that form the basis of experience from which the writing flows demonstrate that there is a variety of ways in which musical experience can provide a basis for health equity and social justice.

The opening chapter of this book sets out its intent clearly and compellingly. Definitions of what is meant by social justice, health equity and social determinants of health (SDOH) are explored. This gives a clear framework to the broad spectrum of musical experience and practice that await in the remaining chapters.

Although the book begins by guiding us through the lenses of SDOH and psychological explorations of how music can be a tool to effect positive change, the remaining chapters are not organised in discrete or themed sections. Rather, the reader is invited to dip into the various paradigms and models that are presented. While this has the effect of allowing for a variety of perspectives to unfold organically, some readers may have preferred some direction in making sense of the ideas and theories.

There is indeed a wide spectrum of perspectives offered in the text. Robertson-Gillam et al offer discussions of the importance of singing for those experiencing depressive illness and elders. Other chapters reference arts participation work with populations in rural Indonesia and First Peoples in Australia as a way of working towards health equity. The important topic of evaluating these music-based interventions is highlighted by Sunderland et al, while Smilde discusses how musical engagement with people with dementia can provide opportunities for

'here and now' moments, echoing Kitwood's theories (1997).

The chapter by Koen utilising the paradigm of medical ethnomusicology, while interesting, seemed to me a rather odd inclusion in the book. Although I found the intent of this chapter intriguing, its relevance in this text is not immediately clear. Whelan, by contrast, writes compellingly about opportunities for social inclusion provided by a post-school transition music programme for autistic people in Australia. This latter chapter has much relevance for musicians and music therapists when considering work with this population.

A jarring note, however, was struck, I felt, in the chapter authored by Hesser and Heinemann describing the work of the organisation Music as a Global Resource (MAGR). While the idea of a compendium of worldwide music-based projects linked to strategies devised by the UN Millennium Goal is a worthy one, the projects that were then chosen for inclusion in the chapter seemed random and with no clear underpinning rationale. The value of a globalised overview of health and social equity music-based programmes is apparent, but I wondered whether the content could have perhaps drawn on themes common to such projects. Such an example could be sustainability and capacity building, which can prove challenging when devising and running global arts-based programmes (Coombes and Tombs-Katz 2017). Opening a discussion on such a topic might have resonated more fully with the overarching theme of the book.

The book draws to a close with what is described by the editors as a crescendo, authored by Clive Parkinson. He is not afraid to critique arts-based approaches to SDOH that he claims have been accepted by the establishment without sufficient evidence for their efficacy or relevance. This polemic certainly offers much food for thought.

His passionate belief, however, in the ability of participatory arts-based work to impact the health and wellbeing of communities shines through. Perhaps the title of his presentation 'A Love Filled Slap in the Face' (2016) best describes his position when he says 'art gives us small moment of joy, but art and artists also give us voice to question systems of control and, perhaps, the means to question the status quo.' (p. 285).

In short, this book is a highly recommended text for anyone interested in music or other arts forms as a tool to address aspects of health inequality. Its broad ranging subject matter underpinned by relevant and robust paradigms has much to offer the musician, music therapist, policy-maker and academic.

## References

Coombes, E., and Tombs-Katz, M. (2017) Interactive therapeutic music skill sharing in the West Bank - an evaluation report of Project Beit Sahour *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy*, 9(1) 67-79.

Kitwood, C. (1997) *Dementia Reconsidered: the Person Comes First*. Open University Press: Maidenhead.

Parkinson, C. (2016) *A Love Filled Slap in the Face: A Manifesto for Arts and Health*. Paper presented at the inaugural Arts in Health Check up, Check conference in Dublin, Ireland.

## Biographical Notes

**Elizabeth Coombes** is a Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) registrant in the UK and practising music therapist. She is also the Course Leader of the MA Music Therapy course at the University of South Wales, and also teaching on the MA Art Psychotherapy, Play Therapy, Learning Disability Nursing and Psychology courses. She is also a community musician, and in this dual role has worked extensively in Palestine, providing training for teachers and health care workers in using music therapeutically with children. She is also a neonatal music therapist with a practice in the Bonny method of Guided Imagery (GIM).