Experiences of music therapists sharing improvisation remotely during lockdown

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Abstract

Music therapy has faced challenges to practice during lockdown. This co-first authored study considers the literature on music therapy improvisation (MTI), and on meaning making in improvisation more generally. The authors explored the creative possibilities of multi-tracked improvisations. This involved the creation of recorded improvised 'prompts', a few minutes in length, which were then 'answered' using audio software for multi-tracking. Through reflections which draw on the principles of auto-ethnography, we seek to describe and explore these experiences and draw meaning from them. Both authors are improvising musicians, music therapists and music therapy educators. While the project began as a way of maintaining motivation for musical activity, it became useful to reflect on the therapeutic and pedagogical potential of the process.

Introduction

Music therapy practice, which often involves shared improvised interaction between therapist and client(s), has faced particular challenges during the lockdown imposed due to COVID-19 in the UK. Music therapy has fundamental requirements which arguably cannot be met in remote work. Even for those clients who have the practical resources to engage in online musical interactions (instruments at home, good WiFi, space to play undisturbed) there is the problem of latency. This means that the moment-to-moment process of shared music making cannot take place in real time, because of the delay between the creation of a sound and the transmission to the listener. During lockdown we explored the possibility of multi-tracked improvisations, as a way of maintaining musical interactions despite being unable to play simultaneously. This approach involved the creation of recorded improvised 'prompts', a few minutes in length, which are then 'answered' by the other musician, using audio software for multi-tracking. These experiments have taken place between two music therapists.

This dialogic reflective piece is based around reflections on the experiences of a series of improvised prompts and answers between the two authors. We set out with the loosely held

aims of considering any potential therapeutic value of this way of working, in addition to exploring the possible pedagogical usefulness of the practice. While we acknowledge our own subjectivity and positioning, by reflecting together on our experiences during this exploration, we hope this will be a constructive starting point for further investigation. In line with a collaborative autoethnographic approach, we use our first names throughout and have worked to keep the conversational character of our individual and shared reflections.

Improvisation in music therapy

In the music therapy literature, there are a number of precedents for engaging in explorative self-study around improvisation (Brand, 2019; Gilbertson, 2013; Keith, 2007; Lee, 2003; Meadows & Wimpenny, 2017). These studies tend towards addressing how we might know what is happening in music therapy improvisations[1]; how meaning is made. This is with the exception of Sarah Gail Brand (2019) who reverses this and uses music therapy theoretical frameworks to understand the interrelational practices in improvising ensembles.

Mercedes Pavlicevic and Sandra Brown's (1996) self-reflective study acted as a springboard for our exploration of remote recorded improvisational prompts and answers. Pavlicevic and Brown engaged in three discrete shared in-person improvisations, which they recorded and analysed. They found changing perceptions linked to the different role identities of *music therapist*, *client* and *musician* in their improvisations and they addressed fundamental assumptions around the fixity of a client and music therapist role in music therapy. Their resulting model for possible shared dynamics between improvisers, based on what was happening musically, was a helpful starting point in understanding relational dynamics and processes in music therapy improvisations: *supporting – mutuality – being supported* - (Pavlicevic & Brown, 1996: 401).

The interplay between therapeutic and musical intention in improvisation was taken forward and articulated by Tony Wigram (2004) in his seminal text: *Improvisation: Methods and techniques for music therapy clinicians, educators, and students.* His clear differentiation of therapeutic and musical intention, defining music therapy methods and techniques, and how

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[1]After Julie Sutton (2019), among others, we refer to improvisation that happens in music therapy as *music therapy improvisation*.

these interweave with therapeutic purpose provide a solid base from which to teach and learn about improvisation in music therapy.

An understanding of improvisation in local or international music therapy contexts still appears to depend on individual therapists' particular theoretical orientation, music therapy education and personal musical background (Brand, 2019, Sutton, 2019). There is still a dominant Eurocentric positioning of music therapy as a profession, having emerged from Western classical music practice pioneered by the early practitioners in the United Kingdom (Alvin, 1966; Nordoff & Robbins, 1992). However, this historically defined musical position is being opened up more and more to culturally and socially aware critique (Hadley, 2020; Hadley and Norris, 2016; Leonard, 2020; Thomas, 2019), and this extends to improvisation in music therapy (Sajnani et al., 2017; Seabrook, 2019). For example, Rebecca Zarate proposes culturally and socially aware improvisational spaces in music therapy which facilitate 'multiple perspectives of listening' (Sajnani et al.; 2017: 32).

Music and music therapy during lockdown

Music therapists during lockdown have been seeking solutions to the problem of being unable to work face-to-face. While music therapy can take a variety of forms, depending on factors such as setting, clients[2], and model of practice, it is typically dependent on the close interaction between two or more people in a room. In the UK there is a strong emphasis in music therapy education on co-created spontaneous music-making, often improvisational (Darnley-Smith, 2013; Nordoff & Robbins, 2007a; 2007b; Priestley, 1994; Wigram, 2004) informed in part by theories of 'communicative musicality' (Malloch, 1999, Malloch and Trevarthen, 2009) and affect attunement (Stern, 1985; 2010). This makes the micro-attunements of real-time interactions an essential aspect of the therapeutic process. Since lockdown music therapists have been exploring ways of simulating these interactions remotely (Annesley, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Problems have arisen, notably the challenge of latency to online shared music making. Even a fraction of a second delay can destroy any feeling, for example, of shared groove. While this may be only a minor issue for talking therapists working remotely (Weinberg and Rolnick,

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[2] We use the terms 'client' and 'therapist' throughout with an awareness of how these terms are based on transactional language. Changing ideas of roles in music therapy are held within a person-centred practice framework (McCormack & McCance, 2017) and with the understanding that music therapy improvisation involves relational interactions between two persons.

2019), music therapists have described how profoundly it has affected the experience of interaction in the therapeutic relationship since being forced online by lockdown (Annesley, 2020c).

Nevertheless, there have been some successful translations of practice into live online music therapy interaction (Annesley, 2020c). Other methods have also been explored, such as the use of pre-recorded materials to facilitate music-making for music therapy clients in the absence of the therapist. Organisations such as Chiltern Music Therapy and North London Music Therapy, alongside the British Association of Music Therapy (BAMT) have been instrumental in disseminating practice in the UK.

It is the authors' perception that during lockdown, musicians have often found a way to connect, perhaps indicating a 'need to be heard' (Annesley, 2020a). Musicians have explored remote musical interaction by various means during lockdown. This has included taking part in multi-track recordings, where the process has been focused on rendering a composition. A typical scenario is that musicians work together to create a composition or arrangement, often recording a video of the performance. The result can be pleasing both for the musicians involved and as a performative piece to be viewed online. While this is not dissimilar to the normal recording process using multi-tracking, what makes this specific to lockdown is that all of the parts have necessarily been recorded individually and then amalgamated during the editing process. Some musicians have been more overtly performative, performing live-streamed concerts from home, or simply sharing videos with their followers/fans. Other experiences on social media have been around the sharing of favourite music, such as by making lists of favourite albums, or of supportive groups such as 'Tune of the Week' on Facebook.

Improvisation in online musical interaction

Both authors have been exploring means of remote musical connection for teaching purposes. Music therapy trainees have been responding well to the challenge of online shared improvisation, both by sharing individual experiments with peers over video conferencing, or by responding to prompts, as we explore in the current study. Luke facilitated a shared group improvisation with colleagues in Oxleas music therapy service, using the same multi-tracking

technique we explore here, with results that were experienced positively by the team members taking part (Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, 2020).

Some improvising ensembles have been meeting successfully online, embracing the technological sphere and working with the glitches that arise when trying to play together remotely in 'real' time. Raymond MacDon00ald (2020) reflects after a group improvisation with Glasgow Improvisers Orchestra (GIO):

> Like all video conf tech the software has a latency, but we can subsume the latency into the improvisation. Also, the software is influencing what we hear in terms of what is foregrounded, relative volumes, EQing etc, and even who appears on the screen. I suppose the tech functions like an algorithmic composer mixing and editing the improvisation…
>
> Given the emergent nature of improvisation we choose to incorporate these features and how we respond to them into the music… The visuals provide endless drama, points of interest and humour and also signals duo/trio encounters within the piece - sometimes with no accompanying sound since the software mutes a lot. While the software does its thing, foregrounding and muting and compressing etc, conceptually it is producing some really interesting music as well as prescient challenges/metaphors (e.g. flattening the curve of a typical improvisation) crucially it is also really good FUN and it's helping us stay connected. Some special and beautiful moments!!

MacDonald's reflections highlight how the sounds and creations that emerge are still as improvisatory as ever, yet as Nisha Sajnani, Christine Mayer and Heather Tillberg-Webb (2020) emphasise, the sense of presence - a vital component in therapeutic relational work – is different and therefore needs to be considered in different ways in an online environment.

Thinking further into how music therapists might work through their changing experiences of life and work due to Covid-19, Luke issued an open invitation to music therapists at the beginning of lockdown in the UK. This was a central catalyst for delving further into solo reflexive practice through improvisation. Nicky wrote about her initial explorations in a blog post (Haire, 2020) and through this began troubling at the question of what makes a single line open to dialogue. The self-reflexive search developed into a performative self-search using the 100days project (https://www.100daysscotland.co.uk) as a jumping off point. Her involvement in the 100days project has run parallel to the dialogic explorations detailed in this paper.

Collaborative autoethnography and improvisation

As Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner set out: 'Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)…' (Ellis et al., 2010: 1). As a method of inquiry, this involves the description of subjective experiences by the researcher. Most commonly, writing has been used as the main mode of reflective description (Adams & Holman Jones, 2018) and autoethnography has been employed for reflecting on musical contexts such as the experience of conducting (Bartleet, 2009). There are, however, more performative examples of autoethnography in relation to music (Spry, 2010; 2011), and in music therapy contexts researchers have used their own art-form, to interrogate and reflect on their own practice (Beer, 2016; McCaffrey & Edwards, 2015; McFerran & Finlay, 2018; McGuigan, 2020; Shaw, 2019), with some music therapists focusing on improvisation specifically (Haire et al., 2017; Lee, 2003; Seabrook, 2017).

In relation to learning and knowing through doing, Sajnani (2012) highlights the usefulness of improvisation as a method of inquiry. She identifies three skills fundamental to improvisation which are valuable in arts-based research: 'openness to uncertainty; attunement to difference and aesthetic intelligence' (2012:79). For Sajnani, 'Improvisation, with its emphasis on risk, responsiveness and relationship, is at the heart of artistic process and of arts-based research' (2012:79).

Another precedent for the recording of improvisational processes and collaborative autoethnography is Trish Van Katwyk and Yukari Sekos' (2017) shared study of improvisation and dance. Van Katwyk and Seko describe how they set out to 'obtain an intimate and in-depth understanding of each other's experiences, and assigned ourselves as both the researchers and the objects of research' (2017: 4). Dialogue was a central aspect of their inquiry.

A common thread in this performative collaborative and self-reflexive autoethnographic approach is described by Lita Crociani-Windland who works to celebrate the methodological usefulness of intuition and subjectivity in research:

> It is the open minded attitude of active inquiry, coupled with the capacity to withstand disorientation and the awful realisation of the deficiency of previous knowledge, that learning consists of. It is a process rather than a thing. It is a relation, a stance or position, a transformative activity. A verb rather than a noun (Crociani-Windland, 2003: 7).

Process

Luke played saxophone throughout and Nicky played violin. The process we followed for this study is detailed briefly in figure 1.

Figure 1:
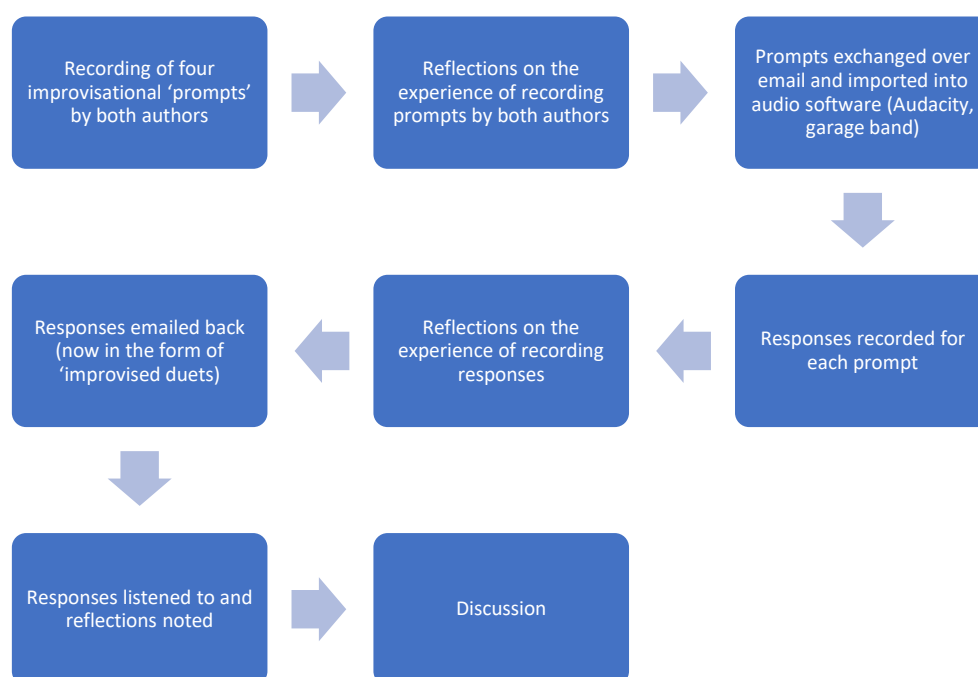
Prompts were not listened to in advance of recording responses, in order to simulate the experience of real time improvisation as closely as possible. In addition, discussion formed part of the ongoing process of dialogue, and referring to literature where helpful, but we maintained a focus on reflection, and sharing our individual perspectives about each stage of the experience.

Reflections

We made no a priori choices about how to structure the reflections, and so there are some individual differences in the layout, and in the focus of each narrative. The following section is structured according to each set of experiences, alternating points of view within each

category. We begin with (Part 1) Luke's prompts - Nicky's responses and then offer a mirror image of the process for (Part 2) Nicky's prompts - Luke's responses

(Part 1) Luke: Making prompts for Nicky

LANH1[3]

I recorded this first, before listening to any of Nicky's prompts. Then, I wanted to have the experience of creating a response before I recorded prompts 2-4, because I was curious about how this would feel. After recording my first response I had an impulse to go back and correct my prompt. It was a pilot attempt and I didn't feel sure about it. I resisted this and decided to record the rest of the prompts before listening to more, so I that I wouldn't be distracted by comparisons. When I later listened back to this first one, after recording the others, I felt better about it. It seemed to fit.

LANH2-LANH4

I noticed as I was recording prompts that I had thoughts which began to intrude on the creative process. For each one I felt a responsibility to do something different, creating different improvisational opportunities. In the second prompt I created (LANH2) I played lyrically in F major/D minor with no obvious pulse. In the third (LANH3) I played intervallically, not thinking about a key but playing atonally and creating. I used no fixed pulse for any of them but the rhythmic character of the prompts varied. For LANH4 I experimented with making different sounds, just using the crook of the saxophone, some of which were deliberate, some more accidental, playing around with the harmonics, including some very high pitches. I felt this approach might be interesting to respond to on violin.

When I played very clearly in a key (LANH2), I felt I became more lyrical, perhaps making a stronger emotional connection. LANH4 by contrast felt playful, even humorous. I was experimenting with an object to see what I could do with it.

Having not listened to Nicky's prompts, except for the first one, I was aware that there might be discrepancies between approaches. Perhaps there would be a culture clash. My playing was somewhat abstract, coming out of a set of personal assumptions about abstract free

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[3] Each track is labelled depending on who was prompting and who was responding plus the number of the track. For example, Luke Annesley (prompt) & Nicky Haire (answer) is coded as LANH1 etc.

improvisation. In a sense I was trying to 'play it safe', be 'polite', not play bebop, for example, because then I might feel that I was imposing something.

Nicky: Responding to Luke's prompts

I felt strongly that I did not want to listen to Luke's prompts before I recorded my responses. I responded in quick succession to Luke's four prompts in turn. The results would, I am sure, have been different had I responded to each track at different times, but I felt like I wanted to address the tracks in sequence. Once I'm in that mode of being, I find it easier to just go for it and fly; you're warmed-up, so to speak, and I find it enjoyable this way.

However, I was surprised at the speed with which I responded, and I wanted to immediately get in touch and tell Luke that. I found this exhilarating and fun and I wondered if Luke would pick up on this excitement in my playing, so I returned the tracks to him without very much information at all and we did not speak until after he had listened back.

I had very immediate responses when I was responding to Luke's prompts which I noted down after I had recorded each one. Overall, listening back to each track, I was impressed at how complete they sounded, and frequently, how dialogic and coherent.

LANH1
During the first track, I felt I wanted to hold and to go against or at least assert my own voice; I heard enthusiastic energy in my playing when I listened back.

LANH2
I was relaxing into the process and felt more comfortable introducing my sounds and my line here. This dialogue was satisfying to listen back to with lots of interesting synchronicities.

LANH3
I felt that I was not focusing during this track, yet overall it sounds like a complete piece and quite organised. I ended before Luke did and this surprised me at the time! I laughed when I realised I had missed his ending, but listening back his coda kind of makes sense as a solo line.

LANH4

I started to feel into Luke's playing more during this last track. I felt an emotional pull, a yearning from his playing and responded similarly, though listening back I am not sure that this comes across in the way I intended. I ended after Luke did in this instance, and again was surprised. I don't think I wanted this track to end.

<mark>Please go to … to listen to the tracks</mark>

Nicky's afterthoughts:

On reflection, I found myself trying to describe what I was listening to in each of Luke's tracks. Was it mostly a feeling that sparked my response, or a more musical (aesthetic) drive? I felt my responses began with listening for both musical and emotional form, and this then shifted to a heightened awareness of an overall emotional sensing beyond musical form – though this happened without active conscious effort and I still felt satisfied when something 'worked' musically. How dialogic did it feel? And what does that mean?

I felt like a therapist in the way I was listening to the tracks. This ebbed and flowed as it might in a music therapy session, similar to how Pavlicevic and Brown (1996) identified different relational roles in their improvisations. Yet, we had not marked out or decided on particular roles in each dialogue. It was left open.

In the improvisations, I was not playing to influence Luke, yet I did not feel I was limited to being in a 'response' mode. His tracks were already set and immovable, but there was room for a kind of dialogue, for difference, for changing his line, initiating ideas and creating something different overall through my playing; altering the context and recontextualising the sounds.

Luke: Listening to Nicky's responses

LANH1

I was very pleasantly surprised by how good it sounded as a coherent duet. I'm no longer surprised by the quality of Nicky's playing because it's apparent listening back what a good improviser and violinist she is - incredibly consistent. The duo sounded coherent and there was a feeling of playfulness and quickness about her responses to my musical ideas. There is something reassuring about somebody connecting with an idea in a way that gives it validity.

It wasn't about my music being 'contained' by her music, but being responded to in a way that gave it a new dimension of creativity and playfulness. Some of the melodic lines sounded a bit Bartok-ish. It made me think of the string quartets - the angularity of the lines. It sounded like a complete piece, some parts sounding composed rather than improvised.

LANH2

There was a more ponderous feeling to this duet, where I was playing mostly in one key throughout and creating some space. I felt a strong emotional connection listening to this, with its interplay of expressive lines. I can hear that I'm thinking about how to do prompts, developing the skill of knowing how to leave gaps, and being confident that the responder will find a way to use this opportunity. Leaving a big gap is a positive challenge. It's difficult to respond to a prompt with a lot of notes and little space. This allowed moments of silence which felt meditative and peaceful. The strong tonality was also a challenge. There might be an ease to more angular atonal material where there are fewer possibilities for 'wrong' notes. Here I felt Nicky was showing fragility in her music, careful with her choice of notes, taking her time to find the right ones.

LANH3

My responses to this piece of music in some ways are similar to LANH1 - it was very playful. Nicky responded motivically at times, going with the energy and enjoying the opportunity for more scratchy choppy sounds. There was a section at the end where I left a really big gap and then played some repeated notes and Nicky didn't do anything, and I thought this was funny, contradicting my expectation that she would fill the gap. The saxophone here felt slightly irrelevant. The joke was on me, but it was a good musical joke. Maybe this was more playful that the first one but it was also a bit more thought out, with more deliberate intention in this improvisation. Perhaps it's getting more 'professional' as we go along, more performative.

LANH4

This was the prompt where I played on the crook and used my thumb to change the pitch as well as manipulate my embouchure. This felt to me like a meditative sound world. I enjoyed it the most in an emotional sense, partly because of being able to listen uncritically. Maybe it's because I wasn't playing the saxophone in a 'normal' way and so wasn't preoccupied with my competence. There's something freeing about manipulating tone and bending pitch

around, not worrying about notes, just thinking about sound and expression. Nicky responded sensitively throughout, not feeling rushed or feeling a need to create some kind of musical argument or musical 'discussion', but instead supporting a feeling of just being in the sound, inhabiting the sound.

(Part 2) Nicky: Making prompts for Luke

Despite the fact that I generally enjoy playing around with different forms and sounds, I found initiating prompts for Luke a difficult process. I tried several times to record some tracks and felt uncharacteristically uncertain about each attempt. There was something for me about making a statement or articulating something meaningful which was getting in the way. I began to interrogate what I was aiming for and wondered if I was trying too hard to imagine what Luke might enjoy or think. Questions started to poke at me rather uncomfortably. How do I create a start for a dialogue? Do I just leave some spaces? Is melodic questioning enough? What is it that makes a line dialogic? My dissatisfaction continued for a couple of weeks while I played around with different voices. Eventually, I sent four prompts to Luke.

Luke: Responding to Nicky's prompts

NHLA1

Nicky's prompt was in a high register. I tried to meet it, to match the timbre and intensity and go with it. Then there was a gap and I started playing something different. I knew that this wasn't going to have any effect on what the violin played next, but I could entertain the idea that it might. In the event, it *felt* like it did, because what Nicky played next had a new character. The presence of the gap, the silence in the music and the opportunity to fill it with something new created a *feeling* of interaction. I had a sense that she was moving towards me. As I stayed in the lower register on the saxophone and moved away from distinct notes and towards sliding the pitch around and playing more gesturally, it felt like a quasi-interaction. I felt self-conscious at times and another thought was – how is Nicky going to respond when she hears this? Is my abstract gestural playing – playing around with upper harmonics and sliding around, but not always being fully in control – is she going to feel that it's an adequate response?

NHLA2

The violin line was 'spiky' in character, and rhythmically unpredictable. It felt difficult to get into a groove, although there were moments where it was almost possible. I was thinking – what do I do with the gaps, because there's a lot of space? Sometimes I let the space pass and sometimes I put sound into it. There was a moment where I played a quasi-bebop phrase, but even in that I was trying to emulate the feeling of what Nicky was doing. I wondered whether I could do something else instead, but also felt – it doesn't matter what I play. It's interesting to note that part of this experience includes moments of doubt in the process.

NHLA3

This was lyrical from Nicky, and I was aware of trying not to play wrong notes. There was one point where there was a shift in the violin, but I stayed with the previous feeling of longer more lyrical phrases, while Nicky shifted to something spikier. I felt that this contrast worked quite well. I also felt that I wasn't playing very energetically. It was quite late in the day – about 7pm – after working all day. Maybe the time of the recording was important. While I felt more emotionally involved with this, I was also aware that we were producing an artefact, which might be heard differently on repeated listening.

NHLA4

I felt that what Nicky did here was challenging me harmonically. There were some interesting intervals. My response was less 'polite' than previous responses. I was more musically rebellious, inventing my own material and listening/responding less. I was becoming aware that a 'let's see what happens' attitude, knowing phrases can be interpreted as responses in later listening, was creeping into my playing. There was a growing awareness that experimenting without worrying about sounding 'good' was useful, because it was going to sound *interesting* in any event. Two musicians being aware of each other will end up sounding interesting in some way, even where the music comes out 'wrong' (whatever that means).

But then I listened back, and I didn't sound at all rebellious. I sounded like I *was* being polite, actually playing a bit under, that Nicky's violin was musically dominant and that I was adding and complementing rather than contradicting. Even where I played things that were contrasting and new, it didn't sound 'rebellious'. I wondered whether this was an indication of our natural musical personalities or whether it was just what was happening in this particular instance.

Luke's afterthoughts:

If I played another four responses they would all be very different, because I'm learning something every time I create a response. I'm learning something about myself as a musician, and what it means to do this kind of interaction, including, perhaps, what it might mean for it to be a therapeutic experience. It felt a bit stressful to do it, but also invigorating and it made me wonder what Nicky would think when I sent it to her. I played, thinking 'I wonder what Nicky's going to think of this'. That's an important part of the musical relationship. It's also a bit anxious and ego-driven, and that's important too.

During lockdown I went through periods of time where I didn't play much, and I noticed that this had an adverse effect on my feeling of wellbeing. When I played again, I felt better, even if I had some catching up to do. Importantly, this is a motivation to do *something* when there is no opportunity for face-to-face musical interaction. It is an organic process, and in that sense has something in common with music therapy. We don't really know where it's going and that is both exciting and challenging.

Nicky: Listening to Luke's responses

Listening back to Luke's responses to my prompts was really gratifying. I was curious to hear what we had created and enjoyed the sense of each 'piece' which moved through moments of coherence and synchronicity alongside disruptions, paraphrases and humour.

NHLA1
Initially, I enjoyed the augmenting of my voice, and how the sound of a different voice changed my voice. I found that the 'sense' of this improvisation (my original line) was clearer as a result of Luke's playing. When I listened again, I noticed how Luke did not imitate me or play similar sounds to my own. He listened and played and voiced something in a different way. I enjoyed this feeling of difference, of feeling heard and somehow carried forward or outward. This added to my sense of conversation overall. I wondered about the feeling of being contained, of being listened to. My feelings sounded back to me like Luke knew what I was 'saying'. Following a

containing period our playing became more analogous and this led to a stillness and then an ending. I had a strong feeling that we made the ending *together*.

NHLA2

It's difficult to feel or tell where I was going initially. I sensed an un-direction in my playing which I find frustrating. I keep disrupting my line, never settling. This is articulated musically in the rupture of rhythmic sense and I feel it bodily as I listen. Perhaps this is throwing up to me what is un-dialogic; not open for dialogue. When I listen for the second time, I find myself more interested. I can hear Luke listening. It *is* conversational, and there is room for dialogue. The insecurity of line that bothered me initially is much less troublesome. Something is being shared. We are sharing something not nothing. I very much liked the way Luke ends this track. In this sense I felt held, my line was held and responded to genuinely.

NHLA3

Overall, I heard a much clearer sense of dialogue in this track. I have the (familiar) experience of feeling ambivalent towards my own playing and I hear references to other pieces of music at some moments, which irk me. Am I caricaturing? Yet, overall, I have the sense that I was 'saying something' in this prompt. If you 'say something' is it easier to dialogue with, to respond? What is it that makes a 'something'? What does 'saying something' mean? Authenticity, emotional 'content', form, musical technique, dynamic certainty… Each of these are multi-layered, dimensional and complex.

As I listen again, I am struck by the thought that if I didn't know who had played first, I might not guess me. There are times when we are very much sharing the space, and Luke could be leading. I have the feeling of going for a walk during this improv; more so during the second two thirds, as if we are walking together and noticing different things. As we move towards ending, I have the sense that we are negotiating something, or thinking together about where to go next.

NHLA4

'Drunk jazz' as kind of ironic musical genre comes into my mind and I feel I am somehow pretending and parodying, and yet maybe also wanting to be 'jazzing' but feeling insecure about how to do this with a saxophonist. I loved it when Luke took off during this one and jazzed 'properly'. I listen again and find I am hamming it up, playing into a made-up genre.

Starting in a sonic world that's familiar but playing at it. I have the feeling that here I am leading Luke on a merry dance! Questioning and provoking 'what will you do if I do this?' and flinging ideas out. Luke's motoric underscore makes a sense of my flurries. Luke's ending is brilliant, it asks for more.

Discussion

As Raymond McDonald and Graeme Wilson set out: 'While playing with others, an improviser is constantly cycling through an evaluative process' choosing between 'maintaining, initiating, adopting, augmenting, or contrasting' (2020: 77) ideas from other group members. In this case, both sets of reflections demonstrate this process in action on an individual/dyadic level. Evaluative processes can be observed both in the preparation of improvisational prompts and in responses, but with different choices emerging, depending on the aesthetic implications of these contrasting stances.

As music therapists we are also thinking about the potential therapeutic application of this process. The prompt process felt partly didactic, as we thought about what was helpful for the responder. They were also personal musical statements, with the requirement to produce something from nothing. The responses presented a different kind of challenge, that of playing something which had some coherence in relation to the prompt. This raises questions with regard to music therapy practice. In this improvisational exercise, neither of us were adopting a role of 'client' or 'therapist'. We made no assumptions about how the tasks of prompter/responder might relate to therapist and client in a music therapy scenario. It may be beyond the scope of this study to draw any firm conclusions about this, but such considerations are part of an ongoing discussion.

Further reflections

In this section, we continue our reflections as a dialogue, exchanging questions and answers, and swapping roles freely in this respect.

Nicky: I love the idea of improvisation being a philosophy of living with irrevocability in every choice you make. That makes me feel very alive. Something about how I listened, and the position from which I recorded my prompts and responses centred around open and dialogic

intention. When I got to initiating and recording my own prompts for Luke, the ones that felt like they 'worked' were built on a trust that they would be listened to as intentional. When I felt less satisfied perhaps my voice lacked intention. Perhaps I was also trying too hard to 'say' something. Maybe Ingrid Monson's (1996) metaphorical depiction of how jazz musicians converse (and assess) the music they are improvising is useful. My idea of saying something certainly feels related to emotional significance or meaning.

Luke: The responses in our multi-tracking process were in some ways easier to create than the prompts, because the responder already has something to work with. But it can also feel like a test – can you play music that 'works' with the prompt? Aesthetic elements might be more challenging. In the prompt, you can 'play what you like'. You can choose whether to make it 'easier' or 'harder' for the responder. You can also decide how much to 'let go' and how much to stay in control of your material. These are first steps. There is scope for exploring this process over a longer period of time, both between musicians and within therapeutic dyads (or groups). Within a therapy dyad, the interplay between creating, listening and discussing musical results might have much to offer a remote music therapy relationship. But this mode of interaction also has deficiencies. what are we missing out on?

Nicky: In a conversation with Julie Sutton on the 10th July 2020, she used the phrase 'displacement of air' to differentiate face-to-face contact with online contact in a therapeutic context, and I keep coming back to this. When you are making contact in an online environment – especially in a therapeutic relationship – there is a real lack of any displacement of air. Something about the compression of what you are hearing, seeing and feeling takes away dimensions of being which, up until this year, I have taken for granted. Interacting and speaking with someone online is not a new experience yet during lockdown it was *the only* experience of interaction.

Having been improvising mostly on my own, especially in the 100days exploration (Haire, 2020) I have noticed that I am playing more softly than I normally would, as if I might overload the mic. I was struck by this when I met up in person with my trio after lockdown restrictions were eased. After six months of not being able to play together live, my sound was inward-focused and quiet. This quietness did not extend to these dialogues, which is interesting. The prompts did provoke a response in kind, a conversational going outward. I wonder how much room there is for 'negotiation' with a fixed prompt?

Luke: One answer might be – there isn't but it sometimes feels like there is. Another could be that there may be scope for negotiation by playing several answers to one prompt and allowing it to develop. We restricted ourselves from doing this, because of time constraints. A follow-up beckons.

Nicky: Does this way of working lead to a shared experience? Almost definitely I think. Yet, this experience and this question makes me think more into the nuances and difference between dialogue and a shared experience; you can be in dialogue and not share the same understanding or experience.

Luke: I agree, and then it depends what we mean by 'shared'. Another question might be, 'Is this more or less shared than a real time improv?' Something is shared, but it is separated by time. Is this a 'good' or 'bad' thing (therapeutically)? I don't think we can answer this question yet, except to say that the two experiences are qualitatively different, and that even face-to-face improvising involves barriers to connection and shared understanding, as Michael Schober and Neta Spiro (2014) have demonstrated. Whether it might be a useful technique in clinical practice remains to be seen.

Nicky: Yes. An idea about sharing dialogue in this exploration began with this question of whether dialogue is possible in this way, rather than reaching some kind of shared understanding, which as we're noticing from other literature is not really considered possible. It's interesting that in preparing this paper I only glanced over Luke's written reflections. Holding his internal process in mind seemed less important.

To think into that more, Macdonald and Wilson address the idea of shared understanding in improvising ensembles, choosing instead to name the socio-musical process 'unshared understandings' (2020: 97). In their commentary on the Schober and Spiro (2014) study, MacDonald and Wilson highlight the usefulness of not knowing what is coming next. For one musician in particular: '… the nature of artistic creativity meant that he wanted interaction to throw up surprises, unpredictable events, otherwise his practice would stagnate. He therefore did not expect that both musicians *would* apprehend such surprises in the same way' (2020: 94).

Luke: Having fun answering the question might be an important aspect of this discussion. We're doing the study because it contributes to satisfying musicians' need for creative musical contact, at a time when this is very difficult otherwise. So the study is itself a 'performative utterance' (Austin, 1975: 6). In (musically) asking the question, we are also exploring the possible answers.

Nicky: I keep coming back to David John's differentiation between noise, sound and music (Annesley, 2019), in which he described music therapists as 'sound listeners'. I wrote about this in a recent blog (Haire, 2020), and John's ideas kept reappearing as Luke and I continued this dialogic exploration. MacDonald and Wilson (2020) take this discursive approach further and highlight the unique 'accessible, social, creative, spontaneous, and ambiguous' qualities of improvisation. Yet, there is still further to go in understanding the relational and emotional intricacies that we might focus on in music therapy.

Returning to Pavlicevic and Brown's (1996) dynamic model of roles in music therapy improvisation and considering these along with John's ideas about noise, sound and music leads me towards different ways of listening, and in turn different ways of thinking. Susan Hadley and Marisol Norris (2016) argue for 'holistic' thinking in music therapy. A way of thinking which moves beyond patterns of 'linear', 'dichotomous' and 'hierarchical' modes that risk perpetuating stereotypical and discriminatory practices. In sound terms, I would put forward a notion of holistic listening which can lead to more open ways of thinking and being in improvisations with a person. Sometimes this involves a 'painful yet transformational process of unlearning' (Hadley & Norris, 2016: 134), yet these complex and nuanced issues are certainly useful for music therapists in pedagogical spaces.

Implications for practice (therapy and education)

Two questions emerged as being important to us. These were:

1. How might our experiences inform the practice of music therapy, especially (but not necessarily exclusively) where remote work is practised?
2. How might our experiences inform the education of music therapists?

Coming back to the question of which role is more 'therapeutic', we suggest that both stances have potential for both therapist and client. Based on these initial explorations, we might begin to name some potentially therapeutic experiences that emerged from this process.

- Offering the experience of musical collaboration/participation/making – 'something musical to do', especially in the absence of other opportunities during lockdown.
- Hearing responses which affirm/validate the prompt.
- Playing to the prompt creating an experience of musical intimacy, despite the separation in time.
- A musical artefact being created that can be listened to and reflected on over time, forming the basis of a developing therapeutic/musical dialogue.

As we are both music therapy educators, we conducted the exercise keeping in mind the possible application of the approach to remote teaching as well. A recent preoccupation in online teaching has been in the development of both synchronous and asynchronous learning (Groshell, 2020), with a need to find the right balance between the two. As with other kinds of musical interaction, providing synchronous experiences of improvisation online is problematic because of the technological barriers to musical synchrony. In pre-COVID-19 times, the teaching of improvisation would normally have been on the list of 'essential face-to-face' modes of delivery.

Working with music therapy students, we are looking to foster that inner dialogue which then enables dialogue with other. In the process we have explored, there are two internal dialogues, both linked to a notional space where the music is shared and creatively developed. When we think about intersubjectivity in music therapy and making connections, we might consider the rhythmicity of Jessica Benjamin's 'third' (2004) or Donald Winnicott's imaginal and play-filled 'potential space' (2006) in this context. Does the time separation preclude a genuine 'potential space', or is it neither here nor there, since, in a shared improvisation or therapeutic relationship, there is always a barrier of some kind? Since the 'third' is able to transcend bodily separation, can the separation in time also be traversed using these methods? Answering these questions is well beyond the scope of the current study, but beginning to ask them may be one of the first steps towards developing the rationale for remote relational music therapy, and may guide our developing approaches to music therapy pedagogy.

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