Book Review


Upon first inspection, this book is a serious read. The size, the cover design, the contents page and the list of contributing authors all converge to suggest a book of substance. As the first book devoted to the topic of communicative musicality, and presumably the foundation of many writings to come, I found this to be quite exciting. The book is claimed to be cutting edge; an exploration of the “rhythm and sympathy of musical expression in human communication from infancy” (cover flap), an aim it achieves through a diverse range of papers. It explores the musical foundations of human communication and relationships in a variety of contexts, and in doing so greatly expands the theory of communicative musicality as it was articulated by Malloch (1999), and Trevarthen and Malloch (2000).

Divided into five logical parts, the book comprises 27 chapters. The opening chapter by the editors includes clear definition and historical context to the theory of communicative musicality. It is followed by Part 1, seven chapters that address the evolutionary and neurologic basis of musicality within social relationships. While I endeavoured to read this section in its entirety before proceeding through the remainder of the book, some readers may find it more useful to dip in and out as their interests dictate. Part 2 provides a variety of perspectives on musicality during infancy; how infants engage and communicate using musicality, how they learn through song, how they relate in peer groups. There are also chapters about the impact of post-natal depression and other conditions on the musicality of mothers’ communication to their infants, and the impact this has on infant development.

The remaining three parts of the book apply to communicative musicality as it manifests within the contexts of healing, education and performance. Part 3 – healing – has a focus on the power of music to bridge extreme psychological isolation. These five chapters cover music making in a community setting, with traumatized children, and with children with severe developmental disabilities; they take a variety of approaches including improvisation, community music-making and dance therapy. While these are the only chapters that pertain specifically to the use of music in therapy, music therapists are likely to find inspiration in other parts of the book also.
Part 4 addresses musicality in childhood learning, and particularly highlights the musicality of teacher-student interaction that is vital to directing attention, action and learning. Part 5 explores the various aspects of communicative musicality within musical performance; understanding the value of music in human ritual, the connection between musical rhythm and biorhythms,
emotional and gestural communication of professional musicians, and the importance of creativity.

One of the strengths of this book is the way the editors have drawn together such an extensive and diverse range of content, while maintaining the integrity of each individual chapter. They provide an introduction to each of the five parts of the book, clearly articulating its relevance and the relatedness of each chapter. There is much cross-referencing between chapters, a fact which remained surprisingly useful and again aids in holding the various texts together. The index is extensive and relevant. For example, looking up ‘communicative musicality’ provides 53 different sub-divisions to assist in finding the most useful sub-topic.

One of the difficulties of such an exploratory book is that its scope and depth could be overwhelming for some readers. I personally found the book both challenging and stimulating to read, but I expect it is a book that I will return to many times as my thinking changes and develops. I found the duplication between some chapters in Part 1 to be annoying, as was the occasional jargonistic author. As an Australian music therapist experienced in early parent-child relationships, I was disappointed not to find a chapter by Helen Shoemark, as she has been applying these musicality concepts to her clinical work with infants for many years. I would also have liked to have found examples from later stages of life. Nonetheless, this text is comprehensive and achieves its aims.

Those who resonate with the theory of communicative musicality will most likely find much to enjoy and feel inspired by in this book. As the title indicates, it really does explore the natural occurrence of human musicality across a variety of contexts. For those who have not yet embarked down this theoretical path, or for those that think it might only be relevant to practitioners working with infants and young children, this book is worth a closer look. It has the potential to stimulate much dialogue and research, and may appeal to practitioners from a variety of theoretical approaches. I expect that this book will become highly valued by those who are interested in the theoretical foundations of music therapy; particularly, but not exclusively, for those interested in social relationships and emotional communication.

References


Carolyn Hart, RMT
Flinders Medical Centre, Adelaide