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25 Reconsidering Musical Expression of People with Autism in Music Therapy

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I. Introduction

The following behaviors are some examples of expressions by people with autistic spectrum disorders, whom I have encountered as a music therapist:

- Continue playing the same note on the piano over again and again
- Continue beating a drum in a fixed tempo
- Continue ticking the rim of a tambourine, without beating the drumhead
- Play various instruments in a particular predetermined order
- Get under the piano or put some instrument (e.g., a maraca) to their ear and listen to it closely
- Make a building like a castle consisting of various instruments
- Talk or hum to themselves
- Listen to and sing a certain song in a certain key. Get angry when the key, length, and/or arrangement of the song changes

You might feel that the behavior of these individuals seems strange. The first time I saw these expressions, I directly experienced a sense of difference in behavior and demeanor between the people with autism and me, a neurologically typical (NT) person. Murakami (2008), a phenomenologist who has conducted long-term fieldwork on people with autism, says that for

people with autism and NT people, this sense of difference can shed light on the structure of each other's lived experience. The present article discusses how the musical expression of people with autism can be considered, with this sense of difference as the point of departure. My premise is that although autism is typically perceived as a disorder, it may be better understood as a culture. Then, I discuss the common points of musical communication in which people with autism and NT people may share. Finally, I suggest some common approaches between music since 1900 and autistic people. By searching for diversity of musical expression, we become open to the diversity of life.

II. Two points of view of expression of autistics: pathology vs. culture

There are two opposite main views of the expression of symptom of autism. One is to regard it as a medical pathology. According to Diagnostic Criteria for Autistic Disorder (DSM-IV), autism is distinguished by a characteristic triad of symptoms: impairments in social interaction; impairments in communication; and restricted interests and repetitive behavior. Conventional music therapy over the past 50 years has mainly relied on a biomedical-psychological view of treatment. Many clinical reports and a few systematic studies in the music therapy literature present evidence that music therapy is effective for the stimulation of communication in children with autism (Gold *et al.* 2006). The deliberate use of controlled musical dialoging as a therapeutic method has been defined as a process where therapist and client communicate through their musical play (Wigram 2004, pp. 97–106); two main forms are distinguished.

1. *Turn-taking* dialogues: making music together where the therapist or client in a variety of ways, musical or gestural, can cue each other to take turns. This turn-taking style of dialogue requires one to pause in their playing and give musical space to each other (Wigram 2004, p. 98).
2. Continuous *free-floating* dialogues: making music in a continuous musical dialogic exchange- a free-floating dialogue. Here therapist and client play more or less continuously and simultaneously. In their playing musical ideas and dynamics are heard and respond to, but without pause in

the musical process (Wigram 2004, p. 98).

One can imagine that just as in a verbal conversation, the dialogue can develop between the participants in several ways. However, some autistic clients find it extremely difficult to engage in dialogues because they cannot follow or respond in "normal" turn-taking exchanges. *Frameworking* is a directive structuring technique for the communication of ideas and experiences in sound with harmonic and rhythmic structure. Children with autism can tease out or release their potential for communicative musicality from within, confining pathological patterns of behavior. In this approach, the presupposed manner for basic communication is what is called *communicative musicality* (Treverthen and Malloch 2000). Connecting this mode of communication with musical structure may seem to presume an "NT perspective," implying that the process contains an aspect of integration into majority culture.

From another perspective, autism may be regarded as an alternative form of consciousness and a distinct worldview. Many people with autism advocate for the recognition that they have their own distinctive ways of being, which include a culture and music (Headlam 2006). According to Autism Network International, a self-help and advocacy organization, autistic people have characteristic styles of relating to others, which should be respected and appreciated rather than modified to make them "fit in."

The problem lies in the fact that modes of musical expression based on the sensory configuration and worldviews of autistic people are different from those of NTs, which are a generally recognized "default" mode of humanistic communication and expression. Accordingly, music therapists need to reconsider their own musical values and methodology of musical interaction; further, they must explore alternative ways of collaborative music-making by employing the experimental method.

III. An alternative mode of communication: resonance with environment

Then, how do autistic people experience their lifeworld through music? The phenomenological study of the experiences of autistic people, articles by autistic people, and disability studies related to music all seem to have po-

tential for understanding autistic ways of music-making.

According to Murakami (2008), repetitive behavior, in which the same sensory input is repetitively elicited, can be seen not as an index of defect or disability, but as a pleasurable and self-sufficient experience. The starting point for an autistic child exploring their experiential lifeworld may be discovering activities that resonate with their sensory impressions. In this experience, both self and others are indistinct; the objectivity and cultural meanings of things are lost; and the child derives a feeling of comfort from the color, sound, pattern, and texture of the things, in a kind of unification with those things. Many autistic people describe this experience as an aesthetic one. For example, autistic adolescent Naoki Higashida writes of his listening experience as follows:

> When I heard the first buzzing of cicadas in this summer, I was surprised by the unfamiliar sound. But I never think "what is that sound?" or "where does it come from?" Just listening to it I was all ears; the sound resonated and echoed in my head. I forgot everything and concentrated entirely on listening to the buzzing. At times like this, I feel unspeakably blissful, because I felt as if I was becoming a cicada buzzing. It is a precious time for me-unable to communicate well with other people well-and it made me sympathize with other living thing and feel alive on earth (Higashida 2010).

Murakami says that this aesthetic experience can be regarded as one rooted in human ability. NT people can reach this experience by bracketing their given cultural meanings, such as language and human relationships. For example, abstract artists in the 20th century, like Kandinsky, took away the objectivity of things and tried to achieve a "movement" of colors and shapes similar to the experience of autistic children. Composer Makoto Nomura's definition of music-making, that *[to experience] music is to experience sounds through all five senses*, seems to be closely related to this aesthetic experience. Nomura has collaborated with various populations of both musicians and non-musicians, including elderly people, children, people with disabilities, and others. He has written about the experience of improvising in the mountains of Ponjong in Indonesia with three musicians who each had a different musical background, as follows:

> At first, I hesitated to play my keyboard-harmonica very much. It was tuned to an equally tempered scale in the Western musical style. However, the other musicians had differently tuned instruments, using Javanese- and Thai-style scales. I felt that every note I played didn't fit for them. It was a continuing process of trial and error. However, *[to make] music is to experience sounds through all five senses*. Therefore, I entirely tried to fully feel the sounds with all my senses, without thinking about temperament.
>
> The cicadas are singing *ji-wan*, *ji-wan*, which is a quite different sound from that they make in Japan. The fragrant breeze is blowing; the trees are all rustling. I am playing not only with Anan and Sbowo [the co-players] but also the cicadas, winds, and all the things existing there. […] I face all the sounds in neutral without labeling them. There is a sound. There are various resounding sounds. I feel something toward them, and I get to produce a sound carried away by an impulse. And I make a sound. That is all it needs.
>
> I have been liberated from my institutionalized ear gradually and become able to play the keyboard-harmonica without having to worry about temperament. I continued to dialogue with everything, such as winds, leaves, stones, rice fields, water in irrigation canals, and so on (Nomura 2009).

What is going on here might be a resonance with things and people as a part of an environment, a different mode of communication from interpersonal and inter-subjective communication.

IV. Towards diversity of musical expression

With this experience as a starting point, we can imagine alternative forms of communication and musical expression. Musicologist David Headlum (2006), who has an autistic son, says that we can profit if we can learn to hear autistically, to recognize alternate forms of beauty and expression in different modes of communication. He suggests that music since 1900 has many aspects related to characteristics of autism. This reminds me of the

American minimalist composer Steve Reich, among others. Reich's compositions, for example *Piano Phase* (1967), are marked by the use of repetitive figures, slow change in harmonic rhythm, and the use of canons, and may strongly connect with an autistic mode of musical expression. Another example is the 1960s avant-garde art movement, Fluxus, the members of which created "events" using new combinations of everyday objects, sounds, images, and texts. Fun is an important aspect of this approach. One can imagine "intermedia" as the use of multiple media at one time, different from mixed media.

Autistic people live in a world in which the linkage of images itself has certain meanings and values. They think by means of sensory images that are visual and auditory, not by verbal communication. We may find some common approaches between Reich or Fluxus and autistic people. By searching for diversity of musical expression, we become open to the diversity of life.

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