Reflections on World Congresses in Music Therapy

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I have had the privilege to attend 6 World Congresses of Music Therapy over the past 15 years (from 1990 to the present day), and as we head into the 11th World Congress in Brisbane, Australia (July 19th-23rd, 2005) it is timely to reflect on the importance of these 3-yearly events and how they contribute to the development of the profession of music therapy. What follows is a personal account of memories from six World Congresses and the musical offerings that resonated with the region of the world in which the congress was located, and how each Congress expanded my geographical and historical knowledge of the world.

The first World Congress I attended was in 1990, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and it was organised by Cecilia Conde and Lia Rejane Barcellos. It was a huge Congress, with hundreds of presenters from across the globe. Translation was provided in several languages and the full spectrum of music therapy clinical work was represented. I recall the spontaneous music-making during the breaks. Small groups would form and start singing, often with guitar accompaniment. Then the onlookers picked up any item of rhythmic potential and added spontaneous percussion. Many times during the Congress these spontaneous improvisations filled the air with highly rhythmic and energised music. I also recall the very dynamic closing to this Congress, when Gianluigi di Franco held the audience in the palm of his hands, directing a wonderful vocal improvisation with a cast of hundreds. I recall him striding across the stage as he directed various groups to take different parts. Gianluigi passed away in March of this year, and we will miss his wonderful voice and generous spirit.

The 7th World Congress was held in 1993 in Vitoria Spain and was organised by Patxi del Campo and Tony Wigram. The music of this Congress that stands out in my memory was a performance on the Txalaparta, a wooden instrument consisting of wooden boards and played by dropping sticks on the boards and catching them again. When played very fast, and with two players, this instrument creates sensational complex rhythms, is highly energising and very exciting to watch. I can recall the sound as I write on the other side of the world in 2005! The Congress in Vitoria provided the opportunity to see the Old Town, and to learn of its history. Coming from the relative young country of Australia (founded in 1788), I marvelled at the buildings from the 9th century, the city walls (13th century), the archaeology museum and the beautiful cathedrals.

In 1996, the 8th World Congress in Germany was organised by Hans-Helmut Decker-Voigt (and others), and brought together many of the groups in Germany and Europe as well as more far flung regions of the world. I recall at this Congress the Peace Vigil, initiated by Music Therapists for Peace, a group that Edith Boxill formed in 1988, in response to her concern about escalating conflict in the world. The vigil ceremony brings together those people in music therapy who are concerned about the effect of war and conflict on our human existence and who seek a more peaceful world. Another memory from Hamburg was the Organ Recital given by Christoph Schwabe at St Michaels church, one of the highlights of the music program.

The 9th World Congress of Music Therapy in Washington D.C, in 1999, was memorable because the program centred on music therapy methods, an initiative of Ken Bruscia. Five traditions were honoured: Rolando Benenzons Music Therapy (BMT), Mary Priestleys Analytical Music Therapy, Nordoff-Robbins Creative Music Therapy, Helen Bonnys Guided Imagery and Music, and Behavioural Music Therapy. The music at this event was also memorable. Who can forget Sweet Honey and the Rock and the astonishing skill of the guitarist Stanley Jordan?
In 2002, the 10th World Congress held in Oxford provided another unique experience. In fact the Congress was sub-titled the Oxford Experience. At this congress the program included Dialogue and Debate - a concept whereby each Keynote address was responded to by 3 music therapists. The congress program was stretched over several conference rooms and delegates walked through the small, winding streets of Oxford to move from one session to another. The music at this Congress was also outstanding with the memorable performances of Evelyn Glennie and Julian Lloyd Webber.

And so we head into the 11th World Congress in Brisbane Australia, where music will be featured in both formal and informal settings. One of the key performers is William Barton who is now acknowledged as a leading virtuoso of the didgeridoo. He began playing the instrument at 8 years of age and was taught by his uncle, an elder from the Waanyi tribe of North West Queensland. William will be performing at the opening ceremony and then offering workshops in the didgeridoo each day of the Congress. The program spans a great diversity of papers on clinical work and research within the traditional areas of music therapy practice as well as new areas, particularly those relating to people who are refugees, who have been traumatised, and misplaced by war and aggression. The Congress will include a Peace Vigil, which becomes more and more relevant as the years roll on.

Looking back over the 15 years, and the 6 World Congresses that I have been privileged to attend, I am impressed by the sheer numbers of people who are practising in music therapy, the quality of the music that is performed either in a planned forum, or via spontaneous music-making with the Congress participants, and the opportunities to learn about the history of new and old places in the world. The Congress in Brisbane will provide more of these outstanding experiences.

Web-site references:

A full history of the World Federation of Music Therapy (WFMT) and the World Congresses that have been organised in conjunction with WFMT, can be found at http://www.musictherapyworld.de/

Music Therapists for Peace: http://www.voices.no/discussions/discm19_01.html and www.voices.no/discussions/discm22_01.html

11th World Congress of Music Therapy, Brisbane, Australia:

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