

Full-Length Article

Developing Music Therapy as a Professional Allied Healthcare Discipline: The Task Ahead for the Association for Music Therapy, Singapore

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Abstract

The founding of the *Association for Music Therapy, Singapore* (AMTS) in September 2007 marked a new chapter in the formalization of the profession in Singapore. Although music therapy (MT) had been available locally since 1963, it took another forty-four years to gather eleven pioneering members together in order to establish a professional society. In the ensuing six years, AMTS' efforts to create awareness via annual MT Days and themed symposium workshops have increased visibility for the field of music therapy. The purpose of this paper, then, is to detail the historical background, current challenges and future directions of music therapy in Singapore.

Keywords: *Music Therapy, Association, Profession, Singapore*

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Background

Singapore, though geographically small and highly urbanized, is the second most densely populated independent country in the world with a multi-racial, ethnic and religious population of 5.3 million people (2011) [1]. Strategically located at the southern tip of the Malayan Peninsular, slightly north of the equator, Singapore became independent in 1965 and has steadily progressed to first world status as one of the world's busiest sea ports.

The population comprises over three-fourths Chinese, 14% Malay, 8% Indian and 1.4% others, including Eurasians, or those of mixed European-Asian parentage [2]. The mix of Malay, Chinese, Indian and European influences have intermingled although each racial group has distinct languages, dialects and religious-cultural practices. Hence, racial tolerance and understanding has been promoted at all levels from education to housing.

Such a multicultural setting poses language and communicational barriers, and presents a myriad of challenges for the growth and development of music therapy

as a profession. Whilst English is the official business language, most Singaporeans also speak their native mother tongue (for examples, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu) and the creole *Singlish* (or Singapore English), a unique, syllable-timed blending of English and local Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, Tamil as well as American slang, with acquired local meanings that may differ from their original meanings. This diversity presents as a both a barrier and an opportunity to framing relevant local public awareness pitches, bridging clinical expectations and formulating research protocols.

The Association for Music Therapy Singapore (AMTS)

In September 2007, the *Association for Music Therapy* was founded with eleven members. Ng Wang Feng served as the first President, along with Melanie Kwan, Secretary, and Loi Wei Ming, Treasurer. The mission of the newly formed organization was to promote public awareness about music therapy as an international healthcare profession and to serve as an organizational body for professionals [3].

In 2009, AMTS became a member of the *World Federation of Music Therapy* and also in December, began publishing a newsletter, *Music Therapy Times*, twice a year. By 2013, publication of the newsletter was shifted to an annual feature in conjunction with MT Day [4]. Despite the small membership, the organization energetically pulled together for various events: namely, submitting a bid to host the *World Congress of Music Therapy* in Singapore (2017), and two Music Therapy Symposiums to date. It was later decided to hold off on finalizing the bid until a time where there were more professional and student members to help with the logistics. The theme of the Inaugural Symposium in 2011 "Global Evidence of Efficacy" was pitched toward healthcare

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professionals, and in 2012, the theme was “Music for the Special Child: Musically Motivating Developmental Milestones in Special Education and Early Intervention.” The latter was pitched toward special educators because the latter had indicated an interest and need for training in applying music strategies within special education classroom contexts.

Historical Beginnings of MT: Serving Children with Special Needs

The first music therapists worked in special education settings. The earliest record was that of Louise Cheng returning from the United States with a Bachelor's degree in music therapy [5]. The former head of the music department of the local Teacher's Training College also published the first local case study in 1989 [6]. The scene saw a growth spurt during the late 1980s and early 1990s with merit scholarships being offered by the National Council of Social Services to send interested scholars for training. To date, there have been three scholars: May Goh Cluelee, Loi Wei Ming and Melissa Loh.

The *Association for the Educationally Subnormal Children* (AESN) (now known as the Association for Persons with Special Needs), Rainbow Center Special Schools in Margaret Drive and Balestier Road were the earliest employment settings. Adding to the contributions of the late Louisa Cheng were Judith Senway (NZ), Eudora Chiu (HK) and Anne Greenhall (Australia). The three worked at the Association for Persons with Special Needs in the 1990s. Audrey Ruyters-Lim started at Rainbow Centre in 2001 and was subsequently followed by May Goh-Cluelee, Ng Wang Feng, Loi Wei Ming, Jenny Lee and Jacqueline Chow. Similar work was initiated and expanded by Angela Mee Lee, Chen Hsueh Lien and Evelyn Lee at the *Asian Women's Welfare Association* (AWWA) from 2001, and by Clara Chong at the St Andrew's Autism Centre from 2005. At the Thye Hua Kwan Moral Early Intervention Program for Infants and Children (EIPIC), David Khlentzos returned to Australia after completing his contract. Jacqueline Chow (HK) had a brief stint there before she joined Rainbow Centre. Angela Tsai and Sophie Yu (both from Taiwan) began working at the EIPIC Centre in 2013.

The first papers on music therapy and special education were presented by May Goh Cluelee and Audrey Ruyters-Lim: a poster on “Incorporating Visual Structure Into Music Therapy for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder” in 2002, and a workshop on “Music Therapy and children with Down Syndrome” in 2004 [7,8]. More recently, in 2010, Loi Wei Ming examined the effects of songs and improvisation used in music therapy on the communication skills of four children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder. Each child acted as the control group for another child within the pair over six sessions of intervention followed by six weeks of no-intervention for one child in the pair. Three of the four showed increased targeted communication behavior. The fourth had a slight increase in targeted communication behavior after six weeks of no intervention.

First steps into the public health system

In 2005, Dr. Patsy Tan was employed by the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) as an Auditory Verbal Therapist with the ENT Department. There was no music therapy position at the time. In March 2007, Melanie Kwan wrote proposals to KK Hospital, Dover Park Hospice and Alexandra Hospital [now Khoo Teck Puat Hospital (KTPH)] and started pilot programs. The positive outcomes led to a music therapist position in January 2008 serving all hospitalized children at KKH, the islands' specialized acute tertiary hospital for women and children, and contractual hours at the other facilities. An award of funding through the Arts for Health grant under SingHealth Foundation led to recruitment of a full-time music therapist, Ashley Spears in July 2010. Services were expanded to women receiving treatment for cancer at KKH and to pilot outpatient music therapy services for children with medical issues and associated developmental delays or other special needs [9].

In 2007, Dr. Patsy Tan at SGH launched a tailored program for children with cochlear implants, “Music to the Ears”. It was the first-such program for children with hearing impairments in Southeast Asia. In 2008, The Music & Creative Therapy Unit was set up. By 2009, services were available to patients receiving hematological treatment, neuro-rehabilitation and for burns. Charissa Tan, also a psychologist, had provided services through the *Leukaemia and Lymphoma Foundation* in 2009 before joining SGH in 2011. That year, Christal Chiang, from Hong Kong, was recruited for inpatient neuro-rehabilitation at SGH. In 2012, an award of *Ministry of Health* funding led to the expansion of inpatient music therapy initiatives for persons with dementia at KTPH. Jane Tan was recruited for inpatient dementia programming in the *Care for Persons with Acute Mental Impairments* (CAMI) ward five mornings each week. The inpatient palliative care and the weekly *Music Therapy and Structured Activities Program* (MAP) were continued for outpatients at KTPH under Melanie Kwan.

Public education initiatives

In order to promote greater awareness of music therapy as a profession, AMTS began to hold public talks targeted at various community groups, such as the Teochew Poit Ip Huay Kuan. The local vernacular, e.g. Malay and Mandarin dialects, was used to reach out to the different audiences. Since 2010, AMTS began hosting an annual Music Therapy Community Awareness Day in April each year. The Inaugural event was launched on April 11, 2010 with Dr. Clive Robbins as the Distinguished Speaker. In 2011, the theme was “Building Musical Bridges” where local music therapists shared about their work with various client populations then engaged the participants with interactive music making. In 2012, the theme was “Sowing seeds of possibility: Music Therapy with children,” and in 2013, “Music Therapy as a Career” was

pitched to pre-university students and the working adult exploring career transitions.

Professional Representation and Advocacy

AMTS has been invited to provide input and feedback to various decision makers and leaders of various healthcare organizations, as well as the statutory boards such as the Singapore Ministry of Health. For example, in 2009, “Music Therapy in SingHealth: Introduction to Clinical Aspects and Operations,” was presented by Ng Wang Feng, Patsy Tan, Audrey Ruyters-Lim and Melanie Kwan to the leadership of *Singhealth*, one of six nationally-managed healthcare groups [10].

The Association also prepared a detailed response to the Clinical Practice Guidelines on Autism that was published by the Ministry of Health, Singapore (2010) [11]. Evidence from a thorough literature review was used to counter the statements that music therapy was not recommended in the “routine management of children with ASD due to inconclusive evidence” (p. 71). AMTS has networked with, and continues to hold ongoing discussions with the leadership of the National Arts Council in 2011 about collaborative community programming for music and wellbeing, and with representatives from the Agency for Integrated Care in 2012 to address needs within the long-term care sector.

Foreign Talent

Music therapists from many countries have been attracted to work in Singapore since the early days and were keen to be affiliated with AMTS. Their conscientious input has helped in small part to address the demand for clinical services due to the small numbers of professionally trained music therapists locally.

These colleagues have included Australian Pamela Fisher at the St. Clare Autism School (2007-09), New Zealander Taiwanese Jenny Lee at the Rainbow Centre Yishun Park School (2008-11), David Khlentzos at the Moral EIPIC (2009-11), American Ashley Spears at KK Hospital (2010-current), Macau-born Christal Chiang at SGH (2011-current), Taiwanese Sophie Yu Yi-Yi and Angela Tsai at Moral EIPIC (2013-current) and Thai Patchawan Poopityastaporn. Associate members have included Malaysian Gurpreet Kalsi, German Susanne Heinze, Argentinian Irene Lo Coco, Finnish pediatric occupational and music therapist Suvi Pitkola and Stacey Douglas from the United Kingdom.

Mentors and Visiting Guests

AMTS has also hosted many international experts over the years. In 2008, Dr. Kate Gfeller was invited as a visiting expert for the launch of the music therapy service for the children with hearing impairments in the *Listen & Talk* program at SGH. During his historical visit from 7th to 14th April 2010, organized by then MT student Jane Tan, the indefatigable Dr.

Clive Robbins was the Distinguished Speaker at the Inaugural MT Community Awareness Day event that year. Drs. Deb Burns, Joanne Loewy and Deforia Lane provided an international perspective on “Music Therapy in Healthcare: Global Evidence of Efficacy,” for the Inaugural Healthcare Symposium in 2011, held at four venues—Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, Tan Tock Seng Hospital, KK Hospital and the Ang Mo Kio Thye Hua Kwan Hospital. Doctoral Student Carmen Cheong-Clinch also shared about her work with teenagers in Australia.

The 2nd Music Therapy symposium addressed “Music for the Special Child: Musically Motivating Developmental Milestones in Special Education and Early Intervention.” There were three parts to the 2012 event, each targeted to a different audience—an afternoon Public Forum session for parents, the Main MT Symposium held over two days addressed to the public and related professionals, and two days of classroom training to empower teachers and related professionals on using music strategies in the classroom. Dr. Katrina McFerran, from the *University of Melbourne*, and Elizabeth Schwartz, of *Alternatives for Children, Long Island, New York*, were the visiting mentors.

Ongoing Challenges

Five years after its founding in 2007, the *Association for Music Therapy, Singapore* (AMTS) has 31 professional members (13 of whom are practicing locally), three associate members and three student members. Their services are available at special schools and early intervention centers. These include *Thye Hwa Kwan Moral EIPIC*, *AWWA Early Years Centre*, *AWWA School*, *Rainbow Centre Margaret Drive* and *Yishun Park Schools*, and *St Andrew's Autism Centre*. Other therapists are in private practice and meeting crucial needs—for example, modulating behavior of at-risk youth at Beyond Social Services, and supporting active aging wellness initiatives through the Health Promotion Board. In addition, music therapy is accessible at the *Singapore General Hospital*, *KK Women's and Children's Hospital*, the *Khoo Teck Puat Hospital*, and *Dover Park Hospice*. There are support groups for Cancer survivors, patients with heart failure, and those who have received heart and lung transplants, or who are receiving treatment for burns as well as those with Parkinson’s disease, for children and adults with muscular dystrophy, and for clients at a residential mental health facility.

As there were reports of self-taught and self-professed music therapists due to the lack of an accreditation body for music therapists, AMTS had initially adopted public education as its mission. The initial aim was to dispel myths and educate the public to distinguish music therapy as active and individualized (and preferably live) treatment by trained professionals, distinct from sound or auditory models of therapy which may consist of using costly pre-programmed recordings with ambiguous effects and that excluded a therapeutic musical relationship. The fruits of this thrust are being realized as more inquiries are being channeled directly

to the association. The association also functions as an organizational body for professionally trained music therapists, and is acting to verify training, as well as define and uphold professional ethics and standards. Members are expected to maintain current professional status with the professional music therapy association of the country of training, for concurrent reciprocal status locally. Professional members are also expected to participate in ongoing continuing education and professional development projects. In addition, there are two common misconceptions that present an ongoing challenge in the development of Music Therapy as a profession in Singapore. The first is the prescriptive model of music, generally held by general members of the public, where there may be the expectation that a piece of music might provide relief or cure of each particular symptom or problem presented. The second is the view by some medical professionals that music therapy clinical practices are not scientific or evidence-based due to the lack of randomized control trials.

As discussed by Charlotte Plum (2011), many music therapy outcomes do not easily lend themselves to be quantified or documented within randomized control trials in the strictly scientific paradigm of the biomedical model [12]. There are other proponents of a variety of research methodologies, as long as the protocols are held to rigorous standards [13,14]. Indeed, with an aging population and the need to improve quality of life of the chronic and terminally ill, there is increased openness to holistic models of healthcare. For example, music therapy received a Grade B, Level 1 rating in the most recent Clinical Practice Guidelines on Dementia [15]: "*Music therapy, wherever feasible, is encouraged in the care of persons with dementia and helps in ameliorating the behavioural and neuropsychiatric symptoms of dementia (pg 53) [15]*".

However, while the role of trained professional music therapists was acknowledged in the revised Clinical Practice Guidelines, a statement was also made that other professionals or family caregivers could provide music therapy. This was because the medical definition of music therapy cited was that of Munro and Mount's (1978), as "the controlled use of music and its influences on the human to aid in the physiological, psychological and emotional integration of the individual during the treatment of illness and disability [16]." There is no question that music is therapeutic and its benefits can be widely accessed beyond clinical settings. However, the need to define and establish professional boundaries of clinical practice is still pertinent. Thus, the way forward may be to increase awareness and visibility of Music therapy as a relationship-based therapeutic process, using music towards functional outcomes as systematically set forth by Bruscia [17].

Development of MT education and training

At present, there is no formal music therapy training available in Singapore. Since 2006, Ng Wang Feng has offered

introductory level overview electives through *Nanyang Academy of Fine Art* (NAFA) for third year Diploma of Music Teaching students and Bachelor of Music majors. An optional follow-up module provides opportunities for hands-on and experiential learning under Dr. Patsy Tan, for students to gain exposure with real clients under supervision. The Singapore General Hospital also runs a one-day whirlwind tour of music therapy at regular intervals. An overview of MT course is periodically available through the *Professional Development External Program at Lasalle College of the Arts*.

Due to the lack of local university-level training to date, the music therapists in Singapore have all graduated from accredited programs overseas--in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. The training gained overseas is diverse, from psychotherapeutic and humanistic orientations in Europe to behavioral models prevalent in the United States of America. Several music therapists have completed postgraduate specialist modules, including Neurologic Music Therapy training or *Neonatal Intensive Care Unit Music Therapy* (NICU-MT). Each professional applies an eclectic mix of theories and methods in their professional practice, and the range of diversity is welcome in the community setting, but greeted with skepticism within medical circles. However, there is a small group of medical professionals who have recognized the benefits of music therapy for their patients, beyond the standard biomedical paradigm. This group has paved the way for music therapists to contribute to the care of patients under one of the seven clusters.

Until such a time where it may be feasible to articulate local standards of competencies and an ethical code of practice, the professional standards for clinical practice governed by respective professional music therapy associations in each respective country have been adopted. AMTS verifies the credentials of local professionals. Professional members are expected to be current professional members of the association of the country where they received their training,

There is a need to explore partnerships with established and internationally-renowned music therapy training programs to get local training off the ground, and for more highly trained and experienced lecturers with doctoral degrees to return to coordinate and root tertiary level basic training programs at the local university level. In addition, there is a need for experienced supervisors who are familiar with local populations to oversee clinical placements of aspiring students and music therapy interns. The fact that Singapore is a small city presents strengths and limitations in terms of logistics and capacity.

Sustainability

In terms of socialized medicine, the government actively influences and subsidizes pricing to maximize benefit for the majority [18-19]. The rate of the cost increases within the public sector is also the benchmark for the pricing policies of

the private sector [20]. Music therapy has yet to be recognized as a healthcare discipline even though the bill to regulate the Allied Health Professions was passed in 2011 [21]. To date, only Physical Therapy, Occupational Therapy and Speech Language Pathology are regulated professions under this Bill, even though a longer list of other allied healthcare professions were acknowledged. AMTS submitted a formal document, in October 2010, on the qualifications of music therapists to the authorities and music therapists also responded to the Ministry of Health's online feedback exercise. Hence, the ongoing priorities are to ground clinical practices, as well as to generate a pool of well-designed local research studies, in order to garner support for local professional training. This is necessary because without the buy-in from the public sector, there will be limited career opportunities for new graduates from the training programs.

Research and Professional Presentations

Local professionals have also been active participants in local and overseas conferences. As the destination of the Second Conference of the International Association for Music and Medicine (2012) was in Bangkok, a large number of abstracts were submitted and accepted [22-27]. In addition, Singapore music therapy was also represented in international as well as local conferences [28-37] and publications [38-46].

Future Directions

Music therapists in Singapore face unique opportunities and challenges, in order to contribute to evidence-based and clinically-based music therapy practices that are culturally relevant to a diverse multicultural population, and to fit well within the local model of healthcare delivery [19,28]. Recruitment of overseas trained professionals is also an uphill task because of language and communicational barriers associated with the range of groups served, such as elderly populations. With few numbers of trained professionals, there are barriers to making clinical services accessible and affordable to the groups that will most benefit from music therapy. Hence, ongoing research projects are taking place at the *Singapore General Hospital, KK Women's and Children's Hospital, KTPH, Rainbow Centre and Dover Park Hospice*. These efforts will provide much needed local data on the impact and effects of music therapy on various conditions and clinical populations in Singapore.

The efforts of two handfuls of music therapists need to be exponentially multiplied in each setting in order for services to be more widely accessible and economically feasible to those who would benefit most—children with special needs and learning challenges, or adults with brain injuries and neurological disorders, for examples; and in areas where internationally, Music Therapy has a strong evidence-base for clinical efficiency—in Stroke and Parkinson rehabilitation, and other medical music therapy contexts such as in NICU or palliative/end-of-life care settings.

Moreover, even though Music Therapy has documented impact in mental healthcare and wellness overseas, the local work for Mental Health Music Therapy is still in its infancy. There is a need for qualified professionals to return and establish and provide a clinical basis for work with the mentally ill and mental health populations, and thus enlarge on the public education efforts of other local music therapists.

Conclusion

The continued development and further growth of Music Therapy in Singapore will need to be focused equally as a three-legged stool: clinical practice, music therapy education and training, and professional development and research. In order to grow and develop as a profession, Singapore Music Therapy will continually need dedicated and trained music therapists who are knowledgeably articulate about various models and paradigms of music therapy. The field will continue to sink roots with each seed planted by those who are able to culturally adapt best practices to different populations, ages, and conditions within the local context.

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Biographical Statements

Melanie Kwan was a founding officer of the Association for Music Therapy, Singapore (AMTS) and served two terms as President from 2010-2014.

Ng Wang Feng graduated with a Master of Music Therapy from Temple University and was the founding President of AMTS.

Christal Chiang served as an officer of AMTS from 2012-2014.

Hui Min Loi has served as an officer of AMTS from 2007 to 2009 and from 2012-14.

Ashley Spears has been a member of AMTS since 2010.

Evelyn Lee has been a member of AMTS since 2013. She works with children with multiple disabilities and autism in special education setting.

Dr. Patsy Tan was a founding member of both AMTS as well as the International Association for Music and Medicine.

Audrey Ruyters- Lim was a founding member of AMTS and the first music therapist at Rainbow Centre.