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ESTABLISHING A THERAPY OF MUSICALITY

The Embodied Narratives of Myself with Others

STEPHEN MALLOCH

Introduction

Beethoven's 'Große Fuge' (the Great Fugue), Op.133, is a movement of a string quartet composed towards the end of the composer's life when he was almost completely deaf. It struggles and writhes, with sharp edges and angular melodic lines. It is a difficult piece to listen to, as well as to play, and it is also beautiful and at times tender. With all its angularity and harshness it seems to strive to break out of the limitations of its own structure. Yet this is the vitality of the music – the dynamic push and pull of structure and expressive movement.

As a psychotherapist and coach (executive coach and life-coach) I hear stories from my clients that at first remind me of Beethoven's fugue. People tell stories of making expressive moves that reach towards the limits of their life structures, but then they find themselves wanting – they are left tired, angry, frustrated, dissatisfied, not sure what to do next. My task is to assist them to refind their creativity, to keep the piece unfolding so that it may flow to the next melody, which will be all the richer for what has gone before. This chapter is my story of how I have explored the foundations of the therapeutic relationship – the 'musicality' of the shared gestural narratives of Self and Other – and woven my discoveries into a model of therapy with both adults and children.

An introduction to Communicative Musicality

Communicative Musicality emerged out of the work I did with my friend and colleague Colwyn Trevarthen during my post-doctoral research at the University of Edinburgh in the mid-1990s. Colwyn is an authority on child psychology and psychobiology, I had just received my PhD in music and psychoacoustics, and together we investigated the musicality of infancy.

The model of Communicative Musicality has its roots in the observed abilities of infants – humans without speech who create with those who love them the most sensitive and intimate relationships. The 'musical' and 'dancelike' gestures of these relationships – *non-verbal expressions of thought and feeling carried by the infant's and caregiver's voice and body* – are harnessed to the intention to reach out to and companion with others (Malloch 1999; Malloch and Trevarthen 2009a; Papoušek and Papoušek 1981; Stern 2000, 2010; Trevarthen 1999). Our musicality (and our 'dancicality') is with us through the lifespan (Bjørkvold 1992; Blacking 1976; Jusczyk and Krumhansl 1993; Osborne 2009; Trevarthen and Fresquez 2015; Trevarthen and Malloch 2000; Wittmann and Pöppel 1999). It serves our need for companionship just as language serves our need to share facts and coordinate practical actions with others using objects in our environment (Cross and Morley 2009).

Until the late 1960s, mainstream medical and psychological research rarely credited infants with complex skills or creative mental abilities, and certainly not with any active sympathy for other persons' thoughts and feelings. In addition, the mother's role was not seen to extend much beyond being a provider of basic physiological protection and nourishment. This began to change as researchers paid closer attention to infant behaviour with caring, loving adults. Babies were observed to have a strong attraction and curiosity for other humans. This attraction, expressed with responsive smiles, vocalizations and gestures, delighted their mothers and drew them into the flow of the present moment of the exchange (Stern 2004). This was communication before speech (Bullowa 1979) grounded in the baby's innate intersubjectivity (Trevarthen 1998). Infants' and adults' communicative gestures arise out of the combination of an infant's innate communicative competence coupled with a shared rhythm for turn-taking between infant and caring adult. These gestures share in-themoment embodied meaning.

The model of Communicative Musicality (Malloch 1999; Malloch and Trevarthen 2009b) is built on the understanding that human beings develop consciousness in intimate companionship. The emotional Self gives shape to these 'dancing' and 'musical' narratives of imaginative communication,

and is in turn shaped by them (Bjørkvold 1992). Both infant and caregiver are motivated to connect, share and develop the vitality of their selves in patterns of communicative movement (Stern 2010).

This motivated movement has certain attributes that can be measured. In the Communicative Musicality model, three components are identified – *pulse*, *quality* and *narrative*. They are defined as follows:

- *Pulse* is the regular succession of discrete behavioural steps through time, representing the 'future-creating' process by which a person may anticipate what might happen and when.

- *Quality* consists of the contours of expressive vocal and body gesture, shaping time in movement. These contours can consist of psychoacoustic attributes of vocalizations – timbre, pitch, volume – or attributes of direction and intensity of the moving body perceived in any modality.

- *Narratives* of individual experience and of companionship are built from sequences of co-created gestures, which have particular attributes of pulse and quality. These 'musical' narratives allow adult and infant, and adult and adult, to share a sense of sympathy and situated meaning in a shared sense of passing time (Malloch 1999; Malloch and Trevarthen 2009a).

As we grow and develop, our innate musicality – our 'muse within' (Bjørkvold 1992) – underpins our creation and appreciation of the arts (temporal and non-temporal). Narrative gestures of the body create dance, narrative gestures with an instrument create music, and the physical objects produced from body gestures create paintings and sculptures. Intricate formulations of gestures create ceremonies (Dissanayake 2000; Trevarthen and Malloch forthcoming). These same narrative gestures can also be therapeutic – they are a direct way of engaging the human need to be sympathized with, to have what is going on inside appreciated by another who may also assist, encourage or console (Berrol 2006; Trevarthen and Fresquez 2015; Trevarthen and Malloch 2000). It is our common musicality that makes it possible for us to share meaningful actions as we plan and work together on projects, and to communicate and share the vitality and interests of life as we tell our stories. Our learning, anticipating and remembering, our infinite varieties of communication including spoken and written language are all given life and vitality by our innate Communicative Musicality.

My approach to therapy: Narratives of the Self

The therapeutic relationship is one of companionship

Many years ago I read these words by Thich Nhat Hanh (a Vietnamese Zen Master): 'The greatest gift we can offer anyone is our true presence' (Thich Nhat Hanh 1998). In my work as a psychotherapist and coach, I sit with people and talk with them, and sit in silence with them. Having trained as a musician, and researched and written about Communicative Musicality, my approach to being with another has strong strands of my curiosity about our innate musicality.

Let's begin by looking at the opening of a coaching conversation.

> Elizabeth, a single woman in her mid-40s, previously married, came to see me for career coaching. She was in a mainly administrative role, and told me she felt stuck and bored and wanted so much more from her work, but didn't know in which direction to turn. She wanted a role helping others and to live her career from, in her words, her 'authentic self.' In her marriage she had felt she couldn't speak up, and speaking up for her wants and needs was still a challenge for her, in work and out of it. During the course of our coaching I had introduced a model around letting go the old and letting come the new (Scharmer 2007). In sessions prior to the one I'm about to describe we had spent time looking at her desire at work to 'keep busy' and 'smile and be happy', which she wished to let go of, and we had been exploring her uncertainty of what might come in its place. In this session, her eighth, she enters the room with her usual anticipation for what might emerge.
>
> After exchanging some remarks around how her week had been ('quite good'), she tells me a short story about how she has felt relaxed and spacious staying for the week in a friend's house by herself (she usually lived in a small apartment). But now it is 'back to the real world – it wouldn't be sustainable me living like that'. I smile slightly, not sensing any particular direction as yet, and feel the conversation starting to lose energy. My mind goes to what we had discussed the previous week, her wish to speak up for herself, and I mention it. She says she has thought about it, but nothing in particular had happened where she felt she had spoken up more for herself than usual. The conversation once more starts to fade. I ask if there is anything in particular she wants to bring to the session, and she replies no.
>
> In the moment of silence that follows I notice the feeling of the lack of vitality between us. Our relationship feels calm, but rudderless. In our relationship's musicality, our emotional Selves are calmly drifting.

As infants we communicate with others through our shared gestural narratives, and as we grow our languaging develops 'on top of' these narratives, enabling us to share facts and coordinate practical actions with others. Meaning is created intrapersonally and interpersonally out of the interacting streams of gestural, body narratives and language.[1]

The aim of psychotherapy for me is to create a shared experience that heals. And while clearly I do not ignore the linguistic narratives that are occurring, a vital focus of my therapeutic attention, and the focus of this chapter, is the flow of our co-creating gestural narratives.[2]

In the session with Elizabeth, clearly words are being exchanged, but the affective meaning of the relationship is not to be found in those words. It is in the feeling of lack of direction, felt by me as calm drifting and acknowledged (and almost certainly felt) by Elizabeth, that our embodied Selves are meeting. I believe it is here, in the felt sense of shared vitality that 'therapeutic leverage' within the relationship can be found.

There are two layers of therapeutic intention in the way I conceptualize the relationship between myself and a client.

The first and deeper layer is my overall twofold intention for the relationship: to be present to the client, receiving and appreciating non-judgementally whatever the client offers me; and to be congruent and authentic in a manner that is tuned to what will enable the client to be more congruent and authentic with me (and thus more congruent and authentic within themselves). This approach is influenced by Carl Rogers' client-centred approach (Rogers 1951), the humanistic psychology movement, and my many years practice of mindfulness (e.g. Ram Dass 1978 [1971]; Thich Naht Hanh 1991 [1975]). It is also deeply informed by my many years' observations of the dynamics of healthy, loving caregiver–infant interactions. In the words of Carl Rogers, 'The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I change' (Rogers 1961, p.17).

The second layer adds a dimension of therapeutic intention – I aim to 'conduct' the session, both non-verbally and verbally, in such a way to encourage 'balance' in the companionable interactions between myself and the client, and so also balance *within* the Self of the client. This is what I am about to do in the session with Elizabeth.

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[1] See the work of Ray Birdwhistell who was pivotal in establishing the study of non-verbal behaviour (which he called 'kinesics') as a central part of human communication (e.g. Birdwhistell 1970). His writings influenced the work Daniel Stern towards the study of 'vitality contours'.

[2] See Norcross and Lambert (2011) on the centrality of the therapeutic relationship for therapeutic outcome.

'This space between us feels quite calm to me', I say to Elizabeth, 'but I don't know where this conversation is going, and you've said you don't have any particular topic you want to bring up. I wonder if you are wanting me to take responsibility for its direction?' She looks away, and seems thoughtful, and then looks back towards me, and with a slight nod, indicates she wants me to continue.

Our 'piece of music', if we are to be moved by it, needs something else, as yet unsounded. I sense our musicality is seeking a balance to the drifting state we are currently creating, so I go searching for what that element might be. When I search, I start by describing what is in front of me (which in itself is an act of searching). We can't know how to move unless we know our current environment.

'I want to hand responsibility back to you for this session. I wonder if this lack of direction I feel is part of why you said the time in your friend's house was unsustainable. Relaxing and calm, yes, but also lacking a sense of direction. Part of what you are wanting in your career is a sense of direction. Maybe we are right now sitting in the energy that is blocking that forward movement?'

Her posture has changed, and she is sitting upright and leaning towards me, an expression of focused curiosity on her face. I discover I also have changed position, and am sitting more upright, and leaning towards her. My voice is louder and clearer, my hand gestures are larger. A new element has been introduced, and the piece is moving. I feel awake!

The therapeutic relationship is underpinned by the manner of our gestural exchanges. In terms of the model of Communicative Musicality it is about the sharing of human vitality. An understanding of the vehicle for this exchange of affective meaning through the externalization of an aspect of one's inner world is provided by Daniel Stern's theory of vitality contours (Stern 2010) and affect attunement (Stern 2000). Affect attunement is the mechanism by which vocal and body gestures carry meaning in parent–infant communication – it is 'the performance of behaviours that express the quality of feeling of a shared affect state, but without imitating the exact behavioural expression of the inner state' (Stern *et al*. 1985, p.142). This unfolding quality of feeling expressed in a behaviour Stern calls a 'vitality contour'. Affect attunement is a multi-modal or trans-modal phenomenon, where the affect of a vocal and/or bodily gesture is attuned to by another and expressed in a different form from the original. According to Stern,

this largely unconscious 'recasting' of events is necessary to 'shift the focus of attention to what is behind the behaviour, to the quality of feeling that is being shared' (Stern *et al*. 1985, p.142).

This is much more than mimicking. Mimicking implies we are attentive to a person's behaviour (an important factor in building a relationship) but it tells the other person very little, if anything, about the inner state of the person who mimics. However, to abstract a component from those movements, and relay it back to the initiator in a changed yet recognizable form, says we are creating with something that has been given to us by the other. I am externalizing some of my own inner life while in relationship. The relationship is now one of companionship (from the Latin meaning 'to break bread with', and defined here as the wish to be with an other for a mutually beneficial 'inner' purpose, apart from reasons of immediate survival, procreation or material gain). Companionship involves exchanging affect through sharing impulses of motivation (Trevarthen 2001).

In the session with Elizabeth, I have just started to co-create with her, through affect attunement, a much more vital experience. The impetus for my upright body, firmer voice, more expansive hand gestures, is the sharing of our innate musicality. And through bringing my attention to what is usually a largely intuitive process I am building on these 'raw materials' of companionship so that the inner affective life is amplified. Within our song and dance my companioning gestures will be more vitally focused with the other, and I will at times verbally name and reflect upon the gestural narrative that is present – as I am about to do with Elizabeth. But also words must be used wisely, and at times withheld. We may 'agree' with ourselves and others in the affective shared embodied space of our musicality, but disagree in the shared objective space of verbal discussion (Cross and Morley 2009). This is also about to happen in the session.

'Look, both of us are suddenly leaning in and sitting up. What is this?'

Elizabeth starts to talk about the eager part of her that so often starts enthusiastically but then nothing really happens. She starts arguing with herself whether it is useful energy or not. I gently interrupt…

'Words are usually about this or that, black or white. I'm curious what would happen if you just continued to lean into whatever is occurring here. Something seems to be happening in the space between us (I indicate with my hand the space above the table that is between us). Just feel it.'

After a moment Elizabeth's eyes start to mist over with a hint of tears. 'What's that?' I ask gently, sensing she is now much nearer to the new musical element that is emerging. 'Relief,' she replies.

It was relief that she didn't need to 'keep busy' and always be smiling. She was experiencing the letting go that was allowing the letting come. As our session continued the letting come turned out to be 'playfulness' – a musical element that beautifully balanced the initial melody of calm meandering.

The therapeutic relationship is a piece of music, experienced in the unfolding present

How do I approach the question of balance? I do not arrive at it through analysis. The beginning point is always a felt sense of the state of the whole. I do not wish to reduce my client to a set of behaviours.[3] In the session with Elizabeth I did not begin by *thinking about* the conversation and its parts, I *felt* its imbalance and its quality of seeking a balancing movement into the future.

Daniel Stern captures this beautifully in his book *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*, where he discusses our experience of the flow of music:

> The mind imposes a form on the [musical] phrase as it unfolds. In fact, its possible endings are intuited before the phrase is completed, while it is still passing by. That is to say, the future is implied at each instant of the phrase's journey through the present moment. (Stern 2004, p.26)

Note that Daniel Stern says a phrase has possible endings – *plural*. In the opening of the conversation with Elizabeth its calm and directionless musicality initially implied different possible futures to her and to me. The client seemed to want to impose a familiar future – the music would loop back on itself, its vitality remain low, and she would continue to look to others to set her direction. I sensed the possibility of a future as yet untested – Elizabeth could move forward into a different, more creative melody, still implied by the first, but one that might bring greater balance to the unfolding 'piece' as a whole. This new melody Elizabeth discovered to be

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[3] See McGilchrist (2009) on the right hemisphere of the brain and its attitude which this approach to the therapeutic relationship epitomizes. Also see Martin Buber who wrote of the 'is-ness' and inherent companionable respect of an *Ich-Du* relationship (Buber 1970 [1923]).

'playfulness' – she began to explore possibilities for her career with energy and creativity, and with much greater self-direction.

So, in terms of the therapeutic relationship based in a model of Communicative Musicality, attention is given to the shaping of the interpersonal musical narrative, and the sense of 'balance' in this interaction as it moves through time. This sense of balance is intuited in the moment. A therapy session for me is like a piece of music unfolding, and an unbalanced piece of music is unsatisfying. The role of the therapist utilizing the model of Communicative Musicality is to be sensitive to and foster a more creative, more balancing, longer-term musicality.

What might be the sensory mechanism through which we sense this unsatisfactoriness of unbalanced movement through time? Colwyn Trevarthen proposes our appreciation of balanced, graceful movement and our ability to produce it is based in a system in the brain called the Intrinsic Motive Formation (IMF). The IMF, which is also intimately involved in the neurochemical system of emotions, is based in the brain stem, basal ganglia and limbic structures. It enables us to navigate our way physically and imaginatively into the future with energetic efficiency and graceful vitality (Trevarthen and Aitken 1994). From the IMF comes the Intrinsic Motive Pulse (IMP) of our musicality. The IMP acts as a central timekeeper and helps orchestrate the temporal regulation of brain/ body-wide systems, both mental activity and physical moving (Trevarthen 1999). It is one of the factors underpinning our conscious embodied experience of time (Osborne 2009). As Colwyn Trevarthen explains, 'Neural energy flows as a consciousness of inner time that structures and regulates thoughts, images, memories, emotions and movements' (Trevarthen and Fresquez 2015).

Within the flow of Communicative Musicality, produced by the IMP within the moving, feeling, vocalizing body, we can sense a balanced and responsive vitality in ourselves and others. And when that balance is lacking, we sense a state which is unpredictable, lethargic or overly energized. Balance is created through moving between different states, and within each state is the implication of a movement to come. A tense body longs to move towards relaxation, a relaxed body is fulfilled in action; a discord in music reaches towards resolution in concord, and musical harmony seeks activity through disharmony. Unbalanced movement is 'stuck' but is felt to want to resolve into a greater balance through a flow of movement. A balanced flow of communicative movement comes about through creative expression (as with Elizabeth 'letting come' her playfulness). The philosopher Alan Watts, writing on Taoism, says,

> *Wu-wei* is the lifestyle of one who follows the *Tao*, and must be understood primarily as a form of intelligence… This intelligence is not simply intellectual; it is also the unconscious intelligence of the whole organism and, in particular, the innate wisdom of the nervous system. (Watts and Huang 1975, p.76).

It is this innate wisdom that I aim to harness in creating therapeutic movement, leading to balance and wellbeing.

Different melodies

'My wife thinks I'm depressed – what do you think?' Mark asked me about half way into our first session. In his early 40s, married for 16 years, he told me his wife wanted him to have more energy, to take more responsibility, even to hang out the washing in a different way. He felt uncomfortable holding firm to his opinions – if someone asked him what he thought of a piece of news that had been reported, he would ask himself what the person probably wanted to hear and then offer that as his opinion.

Three years into the therapeutic relationship, in what would turn out to be the concluding months of therapy, I asked his permission to record a session.

Here he talked of an emerging 'new me' in contrast to an 'old me'. The 'old me' was marked with 'a lack of self-respect', he said. 'I blame myself when things go wrong, I believe I'm not working hard enough.' His voiced droned on, body hardly moving.

This is what a four-second section of a pitch plot of his 'old me' voice looks like (Figure 4.1):

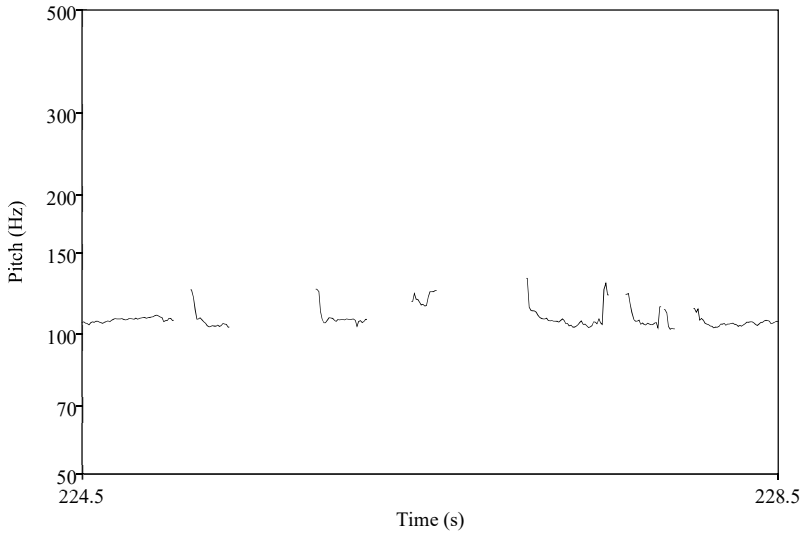

Figure 4.1 Pitch plot of ‘old me’

After describing ‘old me’ he paused…his body relaxed, he looked up from the floor, his hands lifted from his lap, the volume of his voice increased, its pitch lifted, and he began talking of ‘new me’. ‘New me is more rational about life. This part says, “Well, I was uncommunicative this morning – that’s all right, that’s OK. That’s just the way I was. Doesn’t make me a bad person. Other times I communicate really well!”

Below is a four-second pitch plot of ‘new me’ (Figure 4.2):

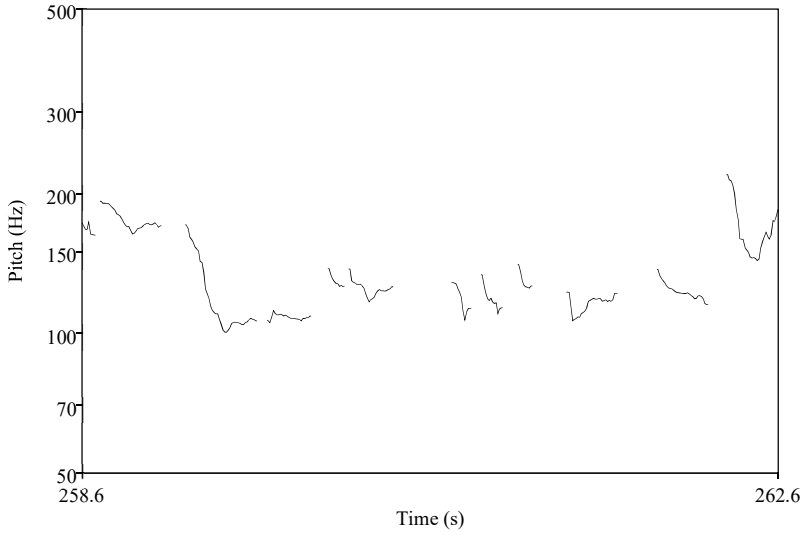

Figure 4.2 Pitch plot of ‘new me’

The shift in the vitality of the musicality is clear.

Over the course of a number of sessions, many parts of a client's Self will become apparent to both of us – for example, Mark's 'old me' and 'new me'. Communicative Musicality is a mind–body expression – inner motivations are both expressed and created through the moving body in relationship.

It was proposed earlier that the IMF, through the IMP, acts to integrate and 'musically' coordinate the living, moving, communicating body. A possible reason our musicality is so complex when expressed as music or dance, when compared with birdsong or the movements of a chimpanzee, is because of the multitude of relatively autonomous 'moving parts' that make up our upright bodies. These require meticulous coordination if we are to move through our environment, into the future, with efficiency, efficacy, and without harm (Blacking 1976; Goodrich 2010; Trevarthen 1999; Trevarthen and Fresquez 2015; Trevarthen and Malloch 2000; also see Merleau-Ponty 2012 [1945]). Our brains have needed to become adept at centrally organizing a multitude of semi-autonomous movements tied to a number of potentially conflicting motivations. I am walking to work, and unexpectedly I see a friend in my peripheral vision. I turn my head and upper torso, wave my hand and say hello, while still walking in the same direction and avoiding others walking in the opposite direction. This is a highly intricate feat of coordination! I propose that this multiplicity of semi-autonomous movements could contribute to the existence in all people of the various parts of the Self – like 'old me' and 'new me' – parts that relate to the world through different motivational lenses.

At this point I want to draw on the work of Roberto Assagioli, an important figure in the development of humanistic psychology in the mid-20th century, and founder of the therapeutic movement known as psychosynthesis. His work emphasizes the existence of 'sub-personalities' and the possibility for the synthesis of these different parts.

> Sub-personalities, in psychosynthesis theory, have been defined as 'structured constellations or agglomerates of attitudes, drives, habit patterns' (Crampton [1981], p.712) and 'learned responses to our legitimate needs: survival needs, needs for love and acceptance, and needs for self-actualization and transcendence' (Brown [2004], p.41). They are, most simply stated, the *parts* of every individual, that may or may not be in service of the whole. (Firman 2007)

Often, these different parts come more into conscious awareness when we are in the process of trying to decide whether to do 'this' or 'that'. Does

Mark continue to blame himself, or start to see himself in a more optimistic light? Behind each 'this' and 'that' will be a set of beliefs and emotions that make up a particular orientation towards how we move through the world and our life. If coordinating well, these parts enable us to navigate our way into the future with grace, vitality and learning. A depth of understanding emerges from integrating multiple perspectives. Mark could come to realize that at times it is appropriate to see one's faults and give oneself a talking to, and at other times it is appropriate to overlook something that doesn't go quite as you wanted, and just get on with things. If our sub-personalities fail to weave together, just as if the head and eyes turn too far to say hello to a friend and the body walks straight into a wall, then harm can come to the whole. Mark could continue with 'old me', blaming himself when anything in his relationships goes wrong, while 'new me' remains merely a hope – he would continue to be dejected and lonely.[4]

As we saw, these different parts of the Self have their own dynamics of musicality. The piece as a whole can consist of the movements of both – a life can consist both of seeing one's faults and getting on with things with a sense of one's strengths. It is in the balance and coordination of the flow of their expression – a flow that will be mutually influencing on both – that health is to be found. Just as the body can move with greater or lesser grace and adaptiveness through its environment, so the selves move with greater or lesser grace and creativity through the changing demands on the Self (see also Stone and Stone 1989).

Discovering we have options, when we have felt condemned to live in just one particular way, is the re-finding of creativity. It is also the discovery of a broader, more inclusive perspective where we become aware of the larger overarching phrases of our unfolding musicality. Just like musicians do as they gain in experience, we learn how the smaller phrases fit within the larger narrative, rather than continuing to believe the smaller phrases *are* the larger narrative.

Bringing awareness to different musical sections

For the therapist working in the model of Communicative Musicality, all themes, all sections, are part of an unfolding composition, and all parts are

[4] This way of thinking resonates with McGilchrist (2009, p.9), who argues, citing Sir Charles Sherrington, Roger Sperry and Marcel Kinsbourne, that the brain is a series of opponent processors, 'in other words, it contains mutually opposed elements whose contrary influence makes possible finely calibrated responses to complex situations'.

to be respected as parts of the whole. The client, however, may fail to see them this way. For the client a particular theme may just not belong, or a particular section is leading in a direction that appears completely incompatible with another section of the composition that is jostling for attention.

By engaging with the various parts of the composition, and bringing awareness to the imbalances, a path is navigated where the parts may begin to cohere more successfully into a balanced composition. The overall structure successfully accommodates the diverse thematic offerings, which work together to create a healthily functioning Self.

In a final example we'll look at larger scale integration of musical sections. In this story, an underlying theme dating from the client's early childhood becomes the basis for unifying motivations and experiences into a larger-scale musical structure. This structure enables the client to more effectively 'conduct' her different musical sections, which had all been competing for attention.

Becoming the conductor

Helen came into my consulting room, confidently and with a warm smile. She looked and behaved older than her 16 years, sitting comfortably on the couch opposite me, engaging me in easy conversation. Born in England, her story was that she had lived in Indonesia with her parents for some years. They had come to Sydney three years before and Helen was now attending a private (nongovernment) school, living in the affluent Northern Beaches area of Sydney, and apart from some doubts about her abilities, she reported doing well in her school subjects.

She told her story in a way that suggested she had told this story before, and indeed later I learnt she had seen her school counsellor on a number of occasions because she was feeling down. She said it had been good to talk with the counsellor – it had helped to get things off her chest, she said.

With her father's encouragement she was seeing me because 'sometimes my head just gets so full!' She was also having strong doubts about the direction her studies were taking. She loved writing, and planned to study English Literature at university, so was opting for as many English subjects as she could. She was getting good marks, but she was starting to find the whole topic 'so boring!' It was far too theoretical. There was no exploration of its beauty.

She just felt so dissatisfied with everything! 'But,' she said, 'I have no reason to. There are people so much more worse off than me – what do I

have to really complain about! But sometimes I just want to tell everyone to just fuck off! No one is really doing anything to make the world a better place – we all just keep talking about it!'

This was the first major section of the piece of music we were creating together in our first meeting. Then I asked a question.

'What do you enjoy?' Her body relaxed, her face softened, as she started to tell me about surfing. She feels connected with the wave when she surfs, she told me. She loses herself in the sound and movement as she moves with the board. She feels connected with the ocean, and she feels good to be alive. Her movements and the melody of her voice were flowing. The piece moved into a different mode – lilting and warm. There was less effort involved in its production. The calm was all the more noticeable because of the previous tension.

In terms of musicality, prior to my question I had felt an imbalance in our conversation. After the initial pleasantries, it had grown staccato, jagged, very dramatic. Her voice had been covering a wide pitch range, her hand movements were abrupt, she had at times been red in the face. Her body was tense. After some time spent in that style of musical expression, it felt to me like her emotion peaked, and she, and the predominant music, was coming to a natural pause or shift. I wanted to give her space to explore other possibilities, for the piece to perhaps move on, and for her to have an opportunity to tell me something else about herself. Or, to put it another way, it felt like the piece was ready for another, balancing type of expressive movement.

In subsequent sessions I learnt that her mother had been ill with a heart condition for some time, and her father was often absent due to work. She found herself caring for both her mother and her younger brother. As she told her story, she would return to her theme of criticizing herself – 'There is so much suffering in the world, what right do I have to feel down?'

There seemed to me to be at least three major musical themes present. The most noticeable one for me (though not the one with the most energy) was characterized by a whole body movement of low-level contained tension. It felt like a melody that seemed at first to be aiming for a climax, but then it turned away and went down into itself. This melody sat beneath the words that said she did not have the right to be feeling down. Then there was the second principal melody – a variation on the first. This second melody would, at times, continue up towards its climax and reach its goal and then flow quickly towards its goal, again and again. This second melody was associated with words that expressed anger – towards her

parents, towards her teachers, towards the world of people who didn't do anything to make the situation better!

Then there was a third, very different, melody – the contrasting theme that had a width and flow. It grew and swelled, would come to rest, and then move again – just like the sea, and her companionship with it which she described.

These three melodies were all integral to the piece that she and I were creating. My role was to notice if one of the themes felt over-represented or failed to flow – if the piece felt unbalanced – and then to encourage new themes, or the reappearance of existing ones, so that the piece could unfold in a way that felt to me, and to Helen, satisfying, whole and creative.

In a session fairly early in our therapeutic relationship, Helen's first two melodies were particularly strong, and the topics kept changing every few minutes – 'I can't take compliments', 'I'm terrified it will all fall apart', 'I feel panicked I will make the wrong decision about my studies', 'I've argued with my dad.' I started to feel lost in the constantly changing variations – probably how Helen was feeling as she moved from topic to topic. I then remembered her image of surfing and the sea, and so I brought that image to my mind, and allowed it to imbue my body with the feeling of graceful movement that I saw in her on our first meeting. The piece she was composing was tightly bound, and perhaps in search of a way to resolve its tension. So I encouraged her to sit with her emotions as she raised each topic. She would sit with the feeling for a moment before whirling onto her next subject. But those moments seemed to be enough. At the conclusion of our session she said she felt better for letting it all out. And I felt I had found an image that I could hang on to in the midst of her storm that helped to balance the music so that the piece could continue its progress.

As our meetings progressed, she talked less of her anger towards others and more of wanting to live more easily with all the different stresses in her life – all the different interlinking melodies. She was starting to take responsibility for her own music – to be the conductor, aware of the whole, shaping the music as it passes. Around the same time she recalled a moment, she thought she was about four years old, when she made a contract with the ocean. 'I agreed always to be with it – to trust it.'

Her surfing melody was gaining depth. There is an approach to understanding the structure of music called *Schenkerian Analysis*. Named after its founder, it posits that great examples of Western tonal music, that is 'masterworks' as Schenker called them, written around the period 1700–1900 can be understood as hierarchical structures. One of the ways these

pieces gain their unity is through ‘deep’ structures (that often unfold over large stretches of a composition) influencing and at times repeating in miniature on the musical ‘surface’ (Schenker 1979 [1935]). This for me is a useful way of thinking about what was unfolding for Helen.

As therapy progressed, so her music of her love for surfing had begun to point to the deep structure that lay beneath it and deeply influenced it – her existential trust and connection with Nature that took birth at the age of four. Having connected with this broad deep-structural context, her ‘inner conductor’ could now hold a larger musical span in mind. Helen could now shape her music of anger and her music of not believing she had a right to be angry into a more balanced whole. She began talking of her thoughts on what happens when her own and others’ wish to make the world a better place meets with the human limitations on that wish. She talked of her appreciation of the love she had for her mother and the love her mother had for her, despite her feeling her mother had never really mothered her. These insights calmed her. Her musicality of voice and body flowed with a depth of connection only hinted at in our first meetings; I let go of tension when I was with her that I hadn’t even realized I had been holding in previous sessions; both of us spoke with more space between ideas. And all these themes worked their way through our companionship.

Helen’s therapy continued for 12 months. Near the end of the school year she said she wanted to take a break, and would be in contact in a couple of months. I received an email:

> I finished school and got really good marks – so happy! I then jumped on a plane with a friend and went to a great surfing beach I know. It’s great over here, and I’m staying here for a while, while I think.
>
> Thanks for all your help – really helped me to clear my head and put things into perspective. Helen

Coda

The unfolding musical narratives of our lives create ordinary masterpieces of stirring anthems, quiet lullabies, tentative explorations and deep hymns of interconnection. All of them are part of the whole, beautiful piece – if we can stand back far enough to see, hear, appreciate and conduct it.

I will end with a story from my own past.

I was raised by my maternal grandparents, my parents separating when I was three. Subsequently I had intermittent contact with my mother as I grew up, and no contact with my father until much later in life. I was cared for, educated and nurtured with love and unfailing commitment by my grandparents, Edith and Noel, but along the way I learned that it was not

OK to say what was on my mind. I learned passive acceptance was the best strategy for things that mattered. After all, both my parents were virtual strangers to me for reasons that were never explained. Things of emotional significance were mostly not talked of.

At seven years old I began to learn the violin. I was reasonably good at it, and continued violin studies up to tertiary level. I still play. But at around the age of nine what I really wanted to play was the drums! I chose my moment carefully after school, when I judged the teacher would not be in the music room. My next memory is making wonderful sounds as I hit the drums louder and louder, and then had the courage to hit the cymbal – really hard! Some kids from my class walked by the window – 'Go Malloch!' they laughed. I couldn't work out if they were laughing at me, seeing me throwing myself into something so unusual, or laughing because of my own joy. I didn't care. I kept drumming!

I sometimes wonder what life would have been like if I had gone home that day and announced I was giving up the violin and taking up the drums. I didn't. I never played the drums at school again. I persevered with the task of getting my arms and fingers to obey the demands of the violin.

The drums and the violin cultivate such different physical musicalities. The drums for me are about taking up space with large, swinging movements of the arms, the sound radiating out and pushing into the world – it can't be ignored. The violin's movements feel thinner, more about precision of control, a fineness of sound that beguiles and at times amazes, rather than demands.

These are two very different ways of moving through the world – pushing into the world and demanding; precision and beguiling. Just as I chose to keep playing the violin, despite the yearnings of my mind and body for the larger more carnal movements of the drums, so for many years I have defaulted to an approach of precision and requesting, rather than pushing and demanding as I have travelled through my life.

This is changing. I am getting more skilled at incorporating both approaches, and flowing with them depending on what the circumstances require. There is a place for both.

Our outer and inner musicality – the gestural narrative expressions of the body and the Self – create the ways we approach our moment-by-moment experience, and our decisions of which paths to take. I will continue to practise listening to it, playing with it and conducting it, and encouraging others to do the same. It immerses me and others more deeply into the flow of life.

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