

Free Play: Living in Music
Peter Davis

Questions

Pick up my guitar and play, just like yesterday.

– The Who

What does it feel like to go home? What does it feel like to return to something that feels like home – that takes you home? What does it feel like to experience something so personal it is, in effect, an extension of the self? What does it feel like to be home, yet constantly searching for new horizons? How does it feel to take chances, to risk, and yet be safely home?

How can one have a relationship with an inanimate object that, placed in your hands, seemingly comes alive?

What is it like to have joined a continuum that became a journey – a continuum that you purposefully perpetuate – a continuum that started when mankind was taking his first steps on Earth –a continuum that will, one day, slip away from your grasp, only to be picked up by another? To answer these questions is to ask other questions: What is it like to live in music? What is it like to share one’s music with others? What is it like to communicate with others within the music?

These are some of the questions I found myself asking while reading *Freeplay* (Nachmanovitch, 1990). When I began to examine my relationship to music, my musical instruments, and my life in music, I realized how fortunate I am to have reason to ask and seek answers to these questions. Some questions, however, will remain unanswered, for no matter how often we look behind the curtain, the music, like magic, will remain a mystery.

Let’s Play

Explaining what it feels like to play his violin, Nachmanovitch (1990) described:

[an] energetic impulse that moves...from the earth through the feet...into the shoulder and down the nerves and muscles of the right arm. The

informational impulse comes from past, present, and future, through the body, brain, and personality to descend, again, down the nerves and muscles of the arms and hands, right through the instrument.

(59-60)

From this string player's perspective, the description provided by Nachmanovitch (1990) is correct. When I play my guitar(s) (and when I sing), I experience a sense of energy, connectedness, and immediacy between my intellectual, emotional, and physical self. The result of this body-mind-soul connection is music – my music. And, incredibly, no two moments of my music (or your music, for that matter) are identical; every musical moment is unique. This speaks to music's ability to capture or reflect the present; by the time a musical note sounds, that note, like time itself, is gone.

Less Playing, More Music

So as not to disturb his friends and neighbors, Nachmanovitch (1990) learned to play his violin “so softly that my music could barely be heard a few inches away... I learned to tickle the strings so that they just whispered, yet whispered clearly and easily” (p. 64). In concert with this economy of playing, Nachmanovitch (1990) discussed the sense of physical relaxation, balance, and fluidity that is essential to playing a musical instrument:

I found myself paying minute attention to the muscle groups as I played...the more I played in different ways, the more I relaxed and strengthened the whole body. Playing the instrument means finding the graceful, balanced form for each action. (65)

This statement resonates with me; when playing at my best, my hands, arms, and shoulders are relaxed. My fingers traverse the fingerboard as gently and delicately as possible. Small moves can produce big results such as changing harmonic structure, adding/subtracting tonalities (e.g., intervals, harmonic complexities), and creating tension-resolution. For this to happen, however, the fingers have to be nimble and relaxed. Strength and tension are also critical to the process – strength to play the various notes, chords, etc., and tension enough to produce the sonic qualities you *choose* to produce, to be utilized in musical experiences and strategies you purposefully *choose* for a client. These qualities include delicate sounds such as harmonics; soft, breathy sounds; large, full strummed sounds; and staccato ostinatos such as those used in Rock n’ Roll/Blues. In fact, if you observe great string players (guitar, violin, etc.), you will notice the economy of movement in their hands. At times, their fingers seem to barely move at all. When I see this, an image comes to mind: that of fingers dancing on the strings, similar to a ballerina, gracefully dancing on a stage.

Practice Makes Perfect. ...Or, Does It?

Is the link between mind, heart, hands, instrument, and emotional expression found in one's technical skills and abilities? Does practice make perfect? Perhaps not, yet choosing to create specific musical sounds and textures to be used in chosen music interventions often depends on a person's ability to play/sing what they hear in their head, as well as what they feel in their heart. Nachmanovitch (1990), discussing the role of practice, supported this when he wrote, "There is a gigantic difference between...[what] we imagine doing or plan to do and...[what] we actually do" (66). Nachmanovitch (1990) added, "The most frustrating, agonizing part of creative work, and the one we grapple with every day in our practice, is our encounter with the gap between what we feel and what we can express.... Technique can bridge this gap" (66).

Music therapy is, at its best, intensely creative work that often requires moment-to-moment decisions, the ability to turn on a (musical) dime, and the ability to be musically expressive. This is seen particularly in the Nordoff-Robbins Creative Music Therapy approach (NRMT), where therapist and client engage in musical experiences that are fluid, changing, and often unpredictable from one moment to the next. NRMT trainees are required to devote considerable time and attention to developing their musical skills and abilities because, according to Nordoff and Robbins (2007),

“creative, responsive freedom in clinical improvisation depends on increasing a therapist’s...[musical] facility while widening his or her musical resources” (461).

Borczon (2004), supporting Nordoff and Robbins (2007), added, “If you feel free to move naturally in your thinking and in your music making while adapting to the responses of the client, you’re moving in the realm of being creative. Being creative is a gift, yet it can be learned and enhanced” (6).

However, strong musical technique is no guarantee of clinical success; an extensive skill set does not magically triumph over empathy, awareness, intuition, and the gestalt of a person – the entirety of who they are and what they bring to the therapeutic process. Nordoff and Robbins (2007) addressed this when they wrote “a *unity* [emphasis added] of technical abilities and musical awareness...increases a therapist freedom to respond therapeutically to the needs and challenges ...[clients] present” (XV). Nachmanovitch (1990) added support to this line of reasoning when he cautioned, “technique can get too solid – we can become so used to knowing how it should be done that we become distanced from the freshness of today’s situation” (67). This statement, I believe, can easily apply to music therapy. To keep the music “fresh,” it must be relevant to the particular place and person, not the last, not the next, and not the possibility that the music sounded “perfect.” (This does not, however, deny the continuum of the therapy process).

Less Can Be More

Do limits determine a “lesser” outcome, or can limits produce wondrous and rich results by providing a sense of clarity as to what resources are available, as well an understanding of the terrain upon which we will travel? To this point, Nachmanovitch (1990), discussed “[the] French word, *bricolage*, which means making do with the material at hand....[a] *bricoleur* is an artist of limits” (86). In effect, this concept refers to making do with what is at hand, via the imagination and the creativity inherent to all. I firmly support the concept of working with what you have. In my case, I work with my voice, my guitar, my imagination, my creative skills, my listening skills, and my expressive skills. Yet, with these finite resources, I can produce countless different sounds, textures, rhythms, tonalities, and moods that can have an emotional and physical effect on others. Add to this the voice, perhaps humankind’s most primary musical instrument, and I can produce lots of music using very few tools.

Of personal interest is the role our hands play in creating music. How does music travel from the brain (and the heart), and make its way to the hands and fingers, which then “play” the instrument? How do forms, shapes, subtleties, and pressures in the hand transfer symbolic, emotional, and spiritual information into an instrument, which then projects the information

in a language, music, that others can understand and appreciate? Nachmanovitch (1990) examining similar questions, spoke to the wonder that is the human hand when he wrote, “of all the structures that impose their discipline on us, the most ubiquitous and marvelous is the human hand....enigmas that baffle our brains are dealt with easily, unconsciously, by the hand” (81-82).

Set the Stage for Music

To play my guitar means inhabiting a personal, special place where possibilities abound. In this place, personal rituals are performed. I remove my guitar from its case. I place it on my lap or wear it on my upper torso. My body assumes familiar postures. My hands go to familiar places. I have entered the music room, and wherever that room (or physical space) may be, it’s time to play music. This concept of a unique, creative environment was referred to by the ancient Greeks as “the *temenos*...a magic circle, a delimited sacred space within which special rules apply and in which extraordinary events are free to occur” (Nachmanovitch, 1990, 73).

When I enter the music room for a session, I am aware of being in a place where special things can occur. The room has a purpose. It is unique. It’s a room where music can bring about communication, connection, new ideas, and personal growth. Recently, during my clinical

internship, I watched a client, “J,” enter the music room for his weekly session. When presented with his favorite instrument (a conga drum), J looked at the instrument with a sense of surprise and wonder; his eyes were bright and he displayed a broad smile. With the conga set in front of him, J assumed a relaxed, assured posture. When J began to play the conga, he did so with delicacy and grace, as if saying hello to a treasured friend. Witnessing this, I felt that, for J, this was a special moment in a special place. In the music room, J could stretch his boundaries and experience life in ways that might be otherwise unavailable to him. For a brief moment, J, playing his conga drum in the music room, occupied center stage.

Home

Having spent the majority of my life in music, I am familiar with entering the creative arena, the temenos. Yet, I continue to feel a sense of awe, wonder, and surprise when I enter the music room, however that room is defined. Years after receiving my first guitar and taking my first guitar lesson, I am more passionate about music than I have ever been. Today, when I pick up my guitar and play, I experience a sense of affirmation. In the music room, standing on familiar ground, I am seeking new horizons and new possibilities. Yet, I know that one day my musical

journey will end. But, on this day, living in music, I am fully alive. On this day, living in music, I am home.

Works Cited

- Borczon, R. M. (2004). *Music therapy: A fieldwork primer*. Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.
- Nachmanovitch, S. (1990). *Free play: The power of improvisation in life and the arts*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Nordoff, P., & Robbins, C. (2007). *Creative music therapy: A guide to fostering clinical musicianship* (2nd ed.). Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.