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“Confusing, questioning and catalysing. An ecological perspective on the relational practice of musicians in healthcare.”

Good afternoon, and first of all, thank you to the network leaders Peter and Stephanie for inviting me to bring some of our work to the table today. What a great way of meeting and sharing this is. Similar to Constanze, English is not my native language, but I do as best as I can based on my notes!

My name is Karolien Dons, I am a musicologist and music psychologist by background. Currently I lead the professorship Music in Context at the Hanze University Groningen, situated in the North of the Netherlands. The professorship is affiliated to the Prince Claus Conservatoire, one of the 9 Higher Music Education Institutes in the Netherlands.

At Music in Context, my colleagues and I study the roles and approaches of musicians and music professionals in general when they seek to contribute to a humane and sustainable society. We consider music as a social-artistic practice. This leads us to exploring themes such as collaboration, co-creation and leadership for example in transdisciplinary settings. *Ethics of the practice* is an important topic in our work.

Today, I will zoom in on **relationships** in social-artistic music practices. Using an ecological perspective on emotions, I will show how engaging in these relationships can lead to *confusion and questions* especially for classically-trained musicians, and how at the same time such ‘new’ relationships can *catalyze* the existing as well as new initiatives. With this I would like to provide some food for thought for the discussions today.

[SLIDE]

1. On building musical relationships

I like to think that fostering relationships is a central part of what professional musicians do. Within the performance of western classical music, relationships are central: think of relationships amongst musicians, colleagues in collectives, ensembles and orchestras. And then there is of course also the 'audience', i.e. those listening to recorded music or those attending live music concerts.

The relationship between musicians and audience in concert settings has been widely studied, which especially within this network I'm sure you are probably very aware of this field. Much is said about the relative fixedness of roles and predictable behaviour of musicians and audiences within the concert setting (Burland & Pitts, 2014; Turino, 2008). A concert is by some considered a dyadic relationship between performers and audience, domineered by notions of 'expertise' (Davies, 2004) and sense of 'separateness and uniqueness' from other persons (Becker, 2001, p. 141 in O'Neill & Sloboda, 2017, p. 332). Although audience is basically a group of people addressed as anonymous; the concert setting does elicit a sense of 'apparent intimacy' (Pitts & Spencer, 2008). Connecting outside of the moment of performance is said to enhance familiarity and can lead to validation and resembling friendship (O'Neill & Sloboda, 2017, p. 335). And familiarity is important, as Sarah mentioned already as well, as Dobson and Sloboda already recognized a decade ago: [SLIDE] "The successful musician of the twenty-first century will arguably be the one who welcomes and encourages a closer and more personal engagement with the people they are performing to" (Dobson & Sloboda, 2014, p. 171).

Now, leaving the concert hall, to considering musical relationships all across society, from what's happening in classrooms, at the kitchen table, bedrooms, churches, community centres, to indeed spaces that can be considered non-musical at first such as hospitals, rural town squares, political marches, heritage sites, and what else. There is big variety in musical relationships. I also like to think that there are lots of musical relationships yet to discover. It is clear that from a social perspective, music is a shared process and that the dyadic relationship of musicians versus audiences is perhaps too simplistic (Trust & Vuillemier, 2013).

In his concept of 'musicking', Christopher Small (1998) reminds us that music making can even potentially *reorganize* human relationships. [SLIDE] Especially musicking that is developed in close connection with its people in its physical and cultural space allows relationships, for example, to be explored, affirmed or celebrated (Small, 1998; Odendaal et al., 2010).

That makes me wonder what, then, constitutes these musical relationships? Unlike the relationships of the traditional concert setting which seems to be largely build around expertise and artistic skill (Radbourne, Johanson & Glow, 2014, p. 55), could it be that additional or other dimensions are there to the relationships? Following Small's concept of musicking, what does contextuality and temporality mean to the relationships? This calls for an ecological perspective, where attention is given to both social-relational and historical dimensions which take into account "contexts, mechanisms and consequences of participation" (Miles & Sullivan, 2010, p. 320 in Gilmore, 2013, p. 88).

[SLIDE]

One source of inspiration for understanding musical relationships from an ecological perspective is the concept of 'emotional geographies' (Wood et al., 2004). Unlike the study of emotional responses to music concentrating on individual experiences as we know it within music psychology, emotional geographies refer to the ways emotions interact with and shape various spaces, social settings and human experiences (Ibid.).

It is said that musicians can have a special place within such geographies. They are, more than the rest of us, thought to be professionally skilled in initiating and managing emotional qualities of relationships in time and space, as they "routinely work with and through the emotional sphere" (Ibid. p. 535). "To make their performance 'work' musicians actively create emotionally charged contexts. They do this through a range of practical strategies; acquiring basic performance skills, preparing set lists or programmes, rehearsing and staging events, finding ways to extend their own embodied experiences into their own performing space" (Ibid. p. 537).

This leads evidently to questions of an ethical nature: how do musicians navigate in staging, and perhaps provoking and encouraging emotions?

2. On building relationships in the MiMiC practice

In the participatory practice of Meaningful Music in Healthcare, in short: MiMiC, a group of classically-trained musicians play repertoire and musical improvisations for patients and staff at hospital wards in a person-centred way. This means that in small scale settings in patient rooms or during the coffee break, musicians visit, engage, talk and play music with others; all this for 4 to 6 consecutive days at the same ward. The purpose is to create musical experiences in which personal connections can emerge and be fostered. The practice was developed by our research group in collaboration with the local university medical hospital UMCG since 2015 (see for example Smilde et al., 2019; Dons, 2019; De Wit, 2021), and has recently been translated to hospitals in The Hague, London and Vienna through local music and hospital research groups (see Dons et al., 2022).

I would have liked to show you footage, but the limited time and technical constraints made me decide not to. I could share some with you afterwards.

[SLIDE]

Staging emotions

A typical visit of the MiMiC musicians to a room with one or more patients would entail asking if there is a need for music today, and what atmosphere or mood the music could sound like, tailored to that specific moment and setting. Specifically for improvisations, the musicians would ask input from patients and staff by asking them to describe a landscape or a place which the musicians then take as a starting point for creating new music.

From the perspective of emotional geographies, MiMiC musicians could here be seen as co-facilitators of emotional experiences and catalysing further connections among those engaged.

An example of this is how back in 2016 at one of the first MiMiC projects, three musicians had prepared an arrangement of the piece 'Angels' by Robbie Williams on the request a day before by an

elderly patient who was about to leave the hospital to go home to pass away. Her grandson was with her that day, the song was said to be very meaningful to his grandma and him, it was 'their' song. Also a handful of nurses were in the room to witness the moment. As soon as the melody was played, the grandson bursted out in tears. On request of the patient, a nurse filmed the moment so it could be relived and shared with family afterwards. The family expressed their thankfulness to the musicians, and to the ward for facilitating this gift at this important life moment.

This is just one example of the many we had that morning, and the tens of projects that came in the years after.

[SLIDE] The connections built through MiMiC have elsewhere been characterized as involving *directness, connectedness and collectiveness* (De Wit & Sevindik, forthcoming). Nevertheless, every encounter is different in nature, incentive, and purpose. [→ this source is a chapter in the book that will be launched later today].

Staging as a coping mechanism

In our analysis back in 2016 of this concrete situation in the room of the older lady with the grandson, we closely observed the musicians and their coping with their emotions. Right after leaving the room, it became very clear that, even these musicians that were already used to working in community settings, this experience, emotionally, was a new level.

We interpreted the moment in the room as having a performative and staged character that was quite exceptional and perhaps contrasting to the other, more open-ended and co-created moments with other patients. We interpreted the 'performance' indeed, as staging their own emotions, as a coping strategy of the musicians.

'Staging' emotional qualities in a hospital setting includes navigating the experience of the other, but, it seems, equally one's own, even if that means slightly shifting away from a co-creative incentives.

Emotions as catalysts for inspiration and change

[SLIDE] Of course also the people that work there are affected by the musical experiences, and here I would like to quote two nurses:

[SLIDE] "We know that when [the musicians] are here, it will be an emotional week. And since I was attending every single day of this pilot, I am indeed 'emotionally empty'. But I would not have missed it for the world. When you are here, we have different, more personal conversations in the team. It makes it heavier than normal, but very worthwhile." (ProMiMiC Pilot 3 UMCG, FN)

[SLIDE] "What moved me more was something that came later to me. [...] After seeing [that patient] experience the Fado piece, I felt [...] he is enjoying life so much. In one way or another, music connects you to the patient. And yes, one way or another it also makes for a different, deeper connection." (ProMiMiC Lab 2, NJ)

[From the classical musicians' perspective....]

Let's consider that this music practice is situated in a specialized hospital, where medical protocols domineer behaviour. At the same time, is this an environment where exceptional emotions can be felt, sometimes in a magnified way, for example when receiving bad news, celebrating birth or losing a loved one. Although the role of nurses in managing emotions of patients is well-accepted, the role of their own emotions in work is less acknowledged and often remains tacit. Allowing emotions at work for nurses may even be considered non-professional (see for example De Wit, 2021).

3. Concluding thoughts

So in all of these examples it may come across that a diversified landscape of emotional experiences can emerge in a social-artistic music practice like MiMiC, and that the relationships emerging and fostered within are unlike those we know typically from the concert hall or tuition studio.

What is more, the experiences and relationships catalyze new perspectives and pathways for both musicians as well as those professionals involved from other domains.

Two take-away points I would like to derive from this.

Firstly, about the nature of transdisciplinary music practices. An exploration of emotional geographies within a music in hospital practice, which is situated on the intersection of music and hospital care, raises fundamental questions such as: who's taking care of what? Or who will take care of me?

Secondly, I conclude that the concept of emotional geographies is fruitful in exploring social-artistic music practices, and perhaps even beyond, including those in the concert hall. But what the concept brought us for the practice of music in hospital wards, has to do with the ethics and specifics of investing in the so-called 'human work' of musicians. In MiMiC, it is the human work that transforms a medically specialized, non-artistic space into a musical environment of equal participation.

Experiences show time after time that so much tacit knowing and sensitivity is involved. Developing such practices may entail the co-existence and perhaps celebration of yet seemingly contradicting voices and feelings, including apprehensive and opposing ones, and those that cannot be anticipated on. Are musicians well-off with good intentions and an interdisciplinary quality and support system? 'Staging' the relationship and emotional moments in patient rooms: how to do that, how to co-create? The confusion of the newness in the approach? The balancing act of making a meaningful experience for others as well as for oneself. Responsibility for emotional responses? Ethical questions around what fits here, now, for us, including myself as a musician? (Dons, 2019; Dons & Gaunt, 2021; Dons, 2021).