

## Book Review

### *Songs from a Window: End-of-Life Stories from the Music Therapy Room*

Bob Heath

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*Songs from a Window: End-of-Life Stories from the Music Therapy Room* will provide readers with insight into what can happen between a music therapist and a client in a hospice care setting. Although much of Heath's work has been done in a hospice with a designated music therapy program in the United Kingdom, it is important to note that, as would be the case in Canada, some of the music therapy sessions took place in patients' rooms or on the in-patient unit. It is an enjoyable, easy-to-read book that will provide useful information about hospice care to music therapists, music therapy students, hospice-care workers, family members of palliative care patients, and anyone interested in knowing more about what a music therapist does.

The author shares his experiences with ten clients who were at the end of their lives for a variety of reasons. They may have been suffering from cancer, had a glioblastoma, were profoundly autistic, or had Graft Versus Host Disease (GVHD) after a stem cell transplant, Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), or dementia. Though these stories are not case studies, music therapists will be able to glean some pertinent information from each one. As the author describes each client's experiences during sessions, he also reminds us that this is a book about relationships, music therapy, living and dying, hope, and the power of music to effectively support individuals and their families through the pain and grief of dying.

The author began his musical life as a musician, performer, and songwriter. After realizing that he was not very comfortable in the music business, he became a community musician for those he refers to as "profoundly disabled young people" (p. 7). It was actually a family member of one of these young people who suggested that he become a music therapist. During his time as a community musician, he quickly learned that he was not equipped to work with most of these clients without further training. So, the author began his music therapy studies at Bristol University. For the past several years, he has worked as a private practice music therapist in hospice care in Swindon, Wiltshire, UK.

*Songs from a Window* is certainly not a music therapy textbook, but it is valuable for other reasons. First, it serves to remind us all that music therapy sessions can have benefits and consequences outside of the session. For example, a family member of a client might be referred to the music therapist to assist them with the grief and loss of a loved one. Second, the author reminds us that music has the ability to evoke powerful emotional responses for which music therapists need to be equipped to provide support. Also, we need to be prepared to support our clients, be respectful of their feelings, and be sensitive to their needs during sessions. We must not make assumptions about our clients, especially with regard to their past musical history or life experiences.

The music therapy room at the hospice where the author works is full of instruments for clients to experiment with, a piano to play, and enough technology to record sessions, produce CDs, and use the Soundbeam—“an ultrasonic device that enables people to create musical sound by making movements inside a beam” (p. 10). The author also uses lyric writing, songwriting, poetry, lyric analysis, and music listening in his sessions. There are examples at the end of the book of the lyrics that each client wrote during sessions, along with a listening list of session recordings and live concert recordings of most of the compositions available online.

The author provides music therapists with some specific considerations and suggestions for this population. He encourages music therapists to read a client’s medical record and personal information before their first session. He reminds us that the first session “can have a profound effect upon the potential for a healthy therapeutic alliance and the subsequent relationship that may unfold” (p. 36). As music therapists, we need to be open and accepting of all clients. It is here that our health-care profession stresses the importance of protecting the integrity of the therapeutic relationship through confidentiality and serving the clients’ needs foremost, and not our own. Perhaps more importantly, the author reminds us of the ethical considerations we need to be aware of with regard to palliative care patients. In one of the stories in his book, the author had to stop himself from making a connection in a session between one client and another, thus possibly divulging personal information. He knew it would be neither ethical nor helpful.

Lastly, the author suggests that, as music therapists, we need to be open and accepting of what we do as helping professionals. He says that although we may not always be sure that what we are doing is having the desired effect, we need to continue to take risks and steer clear of self-criticism.

The stories presented in this book give us a glimpse into the life of one music therapist who works with clients in hospice care in the U.K. Although these stories do not offer us clinical evidence as to the efficacy of music therapy, they do help the reader appreciate the unique contribution that music therapy sessions can provide for this population. I would like to see more easy-to-read books of this nature based on other client populations. It would help promote music therapy in health care and could help the general public gain a better understanding of what can be accomplished when a music therapist becomes part of the health-care team.

### **Reviewed by Cathy D. Weldin, MMT, MTA, BEd, BMus**

Cathy Weldin is a retired music teacher, music therapist, and P–6 classroom teacher who lives in Truro, Nova Scotia, Canada. She has been a member of the Canadian Association of Music Therapists since 1995. Cathy received her Master’s degree and music therapy training at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas where she worked in rehabilitation, and with cancer patients, children and adults with mental health diagnoses, and children on the Autism spectrum.