



## Front and center stage: Participants performing songs created during music therapy

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### ABSTRACT

This study sought to understand what impact and role the performance of self-composed songs played in the therapeutic songwriting process for music therapy participants across their lifespan. Forty-five music therapy clinicians and researchers with established expertise in therapeutic songwriting were interviewed to gain their perspectives on a range of issues related to songwriting as a music therapy method. Grounded theory methods were used to analyze the interview transcripts and led to the construction of three main themes: performance affects music therapy participants' wellbeing; performance impacts on the relationship between participants and the audience; and performance preparation and contexts affects the experience. Findings indicate that performance of self-composed songs can be beneficial for music therapy participants when the client-characteristics are appropriate. Clinicians need to be mindful of potential risks to music therapy participants' wellbeing when deciding whether to encourage or discourage performance possibilities.

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### Introduction

With the rise in popularity in reality television shows such as “American Idol” and “X-factor” which first hit our television screens in 2002, society has taken an interest in the talents of the amateur, the unknown perhaps “less than perfect” talent of members of their own communities. Further, media attention is paid not just to the actual musical talent, but to capturing footage of the lives of the people behind the musical skill; a little of their “off-stage” lives are revealed. Along with the Idol movement, an increasing trend in music therapy is emerging whereby MT-participant (MT-participant<sup>1</sup>) performance is an important component of the approach (e.g. Baker, Wigram, Stott, & McFerran, 2008, 2009; Day et al., 2009; O’Grady, 2009; Soshensky, 2011). Performing has predominantly taken the form of singing in choirs (Bailey & Davidson, 2003; Dingle, Brander, Ballantyne, & Baker, in press; Elefant, 2010) whereas the performance of clients’ self-composed songs has also gained some recognition in the music therapy literature but without a comprehensive examination of the issues around this topic.

This paper aims to expand the limited knowledge concerning the role of performing client-composed song creations as understood and experienced by clinicians working in the field.

#### *Performance and the individual songwriter*

It has now been established across numerous clinical groups, that songs composed by clients have a life beyond the session/s in which they were created, and are performed for wider audiences<sup>2</sup> (Baker et al., 2008, 2009). A comprehensive review of the literature indicates that performance impacts on the individual songwriter. Performing reinforces and validates internal changes within the client (Turry, 2001) and facilitates experiences of being “heard” by others (Day et al., 2009; MacDonald & Viegas, 2011; O’Brien, 2006). O’Grady (2009) found in her study of women in prison, that the performance encourages clients to move from focusing on what they can get from the world to what they can give back.

Feelings experienced by clients who sing their song creations are complex with positive feelings experienced alongside negative ones. For example, a combination of excitement, empowerment and performance anxiety was noted in Day et al.’s (2009) clients

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<sup>1</sup> The term MT-participants refers to music therapy clinicians and researchers who were participants in this study. The term client refers to people who were not participants in this study but who participate in music therapy sessions of the MT-participants interviewed in this study.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to define what is meant by performing in this paper which goes beyond the context of a participant presenting himself in front of an audience (larger or small) and singing or playing his song creation in real time. In this paper, performing also includes professional musicians performing participants’ songs while the participants are present and playing recordings of songs to others while participants are present.

who were presenting their song-stories of childhood abuse. Similarly, O'Grady's (2009) women in prison expressed feeling courage and pride while also reporting anxiety when performing their songs. By contrast, a study of retirees composing and then performing their songs found that mood was more positive, and that the retirees experienced increased levels of energy and arousal. No negative feelings were reported. Perhaps the differences between Baker and Ballantyne (2012) findings and the Day et al. and O'Grady studies are due to the nature of the songs' content with the latter studies containing highly sensitive and painful material, and the former more related to positive reminiscence of earlier life experiences.

Turley (2005) suggests that preparation is needed before clients perform in a public space. He asserts that performance should follow a series of smaller more private performances as a way of building clients' confidence to sing about their life experiences and to enhance the clients' ability to attune to the audience.

Creating a song and then performing it in a public space facilitates a sense of achievement for clients, an experience of having completed and accomplished something and having moved forward; feelings they may not encounter often (Day et al., 2009; O'Grady, 2009). Self-esteem was enhanced when young people at risk in low socioeconomic communities of Philadelphia autographed their CDs at CD launches (MacDonald & Viega, 2011). During the launch, the young people received tributes for their achievements and even greater self-esteem as their music was being broadcasted across the city via media coverage of the CD launch.

Widening community awareness of the issues and challenges clients face in their daily lives is an important social action goal for some people who create songs (Day et al., 2009; O'Grady, 2009; Soshensky, 2011). Soshensky suggests that it is the music that allows positive and negative feelings and experiences to be communicated to an audience via melody, harmony and lyrics without "directly acting them out". By communicating their stories to the wider audience, clients experience self-efficacy and meaningfully contribute to raising awareness of important social issues within their own communities (Day et al., 2009; Soshensky, 2011).

When clients with mental health issues perform in public, the community may discover a new appreciation and understanding of these people who were otherwise members of the community people usually avoided (Dingle et al., in press; O'Grady, 2009; Soshensky, 2011). It allows the community to see the individual as a creative individual who has an important and valid story to tell. Here, society's perception of disability is transformed as the audience becomes connected to the performer (Soshensky, 2011).

While performing is intimidating, audience feedback validates the sense of achievement people have when they move through a personal process and document this through the creation of a song (Day et al., 2009; O'Grady, 2009). O'Grady (2009) concluded that the performance of self-composed songs was a bridge between the private and public; by performing, the client brings his private world into a public space. Going public with song creations can be challenging for some client groups (e.g. women who have been abused) because they fear being judged by their audiences (Day et al., 2009). McFerran and Tegge (2011) and Turley (2005) propose that there is a need to ensure that the audiences are appropriate before a performance takes place.

Performing self-composed song creations as a group rather than as individuals can provide necessary support to enable the process to be valuable for each of the group members. Women in O'Grady's (2009) and Day et al.'s (2009) studies experienced the group singing of songs as positive and believed that it would be easier to perform in a group than alone.

Performing one's own song creations has been one means of retirees and adults with cancer connecting with their local community (O'Brien, 2006). O'Brien (2006) assisted clients with cancer

to create an opera, which was later performed by professional opera singers, not the clients themselves. O'Brien's clients suggested that the opera performance was "illuminating" for audience members, particularly for the clients' closest friends and relatives.

In summary, these studies show that performance of song creations can instill a sense of achievement in clients albeit accompanied by a certain degree of anxiety. The performances call for clients to share their stories and provide possibilities for receiving support and validation from audience participants. Further, performances of song creations tend to build connections between the client and the community. What is important to note however, is that there is a paucity of research in this area ( $N=7$ ) with only O'Grady's (2009), Day et al. (2009) and Turley (2005) describing in some detail the role of performance with their clients. Further, the populations served in these 7 studies are restricted to retirees, people with cancer, women in prisons, women who have been abused, and young people who have experienced natural disasters. Baker et al.'s (2008/2009) studies indicate that songs created during therapy are performed by clients with diagnoses of a mental health illness, developmental disability or neurological injury and yet no literature exists that explains its value or risks to these vulnerable populations. Therefore, more data are needed to better understand the role of performance in songwriting across the lifespan. This study sought to discover clinicians' perspectives of the role of performance within programs that utilized songwriting methods and to report not only on its positive role in the therapy process but to uncover potential concerns of clinicians. The specific research question was: what is the role of performance in the songwriting process?

## Method

This study was supported by an Australian Research Council Future Fellowship (2011–2015).

### *Stance of the researcher*

Over the past twenty years I have developed a strong interest in songwriting as a music therapy method and I am continuously seeking to learn about its potential to impact the lives of people. I have witnessed first hand the pride and sense of self-worth derived not only from the creation of the songs themselves, but through their performance to friends and families. At the same time, I was wary about permitting larger public performances of these songs as I was concerned about the clients' capacity to receive critique from well-meaning audience members, to experience performance anxiety, or to experience overwhelming emotional responses as they shared their 'heart and soul' with others. From years of reflection, I have often wondered whether some of my clients would have benefited from performance experiences but the nagging doubt led me to action a blanket rule that I did not organize or encourage such activity unless the song was specifically created to communicate messages to significant others.

### *Research approach*

This study drew on elements of classic (Glaser, 1978) and Strauss grounded theory methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in that the project aims to identify patterns of music therapists' thinking at the conceptual level that transcend empirical differences (classic Grounded Theory) but also expand the properties and dimensions of a category by presenting multiple, potentially conflicting perspectives and engaging participant verification in the process (Straussian grounded theory, Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Central to grounded theory methods is prolonged immersion with the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

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