

British Society for Music Therapy

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David Luck, an archivist in the Collections team at LMA, tells the story of the British Society for Music Therapy and gives insights into its archive which he has recently finished cataloguing.



Established in 1958 under the name of The Society for Music Therapy and Remedial Music, The British Society for Music Therapy (BSMT) was one of the first groups that sought to promote the benefits of using music in a clinical environment. It did this through publishing academic reports and articles, arranging discussion groups, conferences and workshops (both on its own and later in conjunction with the Association of Professional Music Therapists), and later through its support of graduate music therapy courses.

The Society was initially driven by Juliette Alvin, a French cellist who became one of the most influential figures in the progression of music therapy in Britain, and who remained on the Society's Executive Committee until her death in 1982. By this time music therapy had developed from a novel aspect of patient treatment into a widely respected strand of expressive therapy. At least part of her influence stemmed from her role in establishing the first music therapy training course at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in 1967: many of her students there, such as Mary Priestly, went on to be influential figures in the profession in their own right. In 1984 the BSMT established the Juliette Alvin Memorial Charitable Fund to bring music therapy to those who could benefit from it.

The collection held at London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) covers the first activities of the Society to its 50th anniversary concert, just before its amalgamation with The Association of Professional Music Therapists in 2011. The records consist not only of those created to aid Society governance and administration (such as minutes and publicity material), but also the majority of the printed output of the BSMT, including academic journals and papers, and the research pieces presented to the Society's conferences.

While many medical professionals in the 1950s thought that music could be used in clinical treatment, no one had yet worked out the best practice for its use in therapy, or even begun to examine which patients would benefit most from it. The early journals and conference papers of the Society began to map this early discourse and practice through reports, articles and meeting transcripts. Most took the work of Nordoff and Robbins, who used music as a way of treating and communicating with severely disabled and withdrawn children, as a starting point, though actual practice of the theory varied wildly between institutions.



The development of the BSMT journal reflects the development and growth of interest in music therapy as a whole. In 1958 the first journal's six typed pages were held together by two staples, and mixed some academic opinions amongst society news and events for its 50 members. By the late 1980s the Journal was professionally published and edited, and the articles and views were debated by a wide range of music therapy specialists and other medical workers in the UK and abroad.

Though the focus of much of this work was the place of music in the treatment and therapy of the disabled in hospitals or specialist institutions, the scope of music therapy broadened over time to include the elderly (particularly those with dementia and Alzheimer's disease), criminals, school children and even stressed city workers. While each therapist practised in different ways, the goal with all these groups was to give them an opportunity to express their inner lives through music, an opportunity that was missing from their everyday experiences.

One story recounted in an early conference about a child who took the grade 1 piano test, despite numerous physical disabilities. Before the test he told his teacher he would do well 'because he was so enthusiastic', and passed with a distinction after only seven minutes. Nearly 50 years later a conference speaker used as a case study the example of how she helped a successful doctor find 'his sense of light' after a period of dire depression.

The research methodology is a mix of science, psychology, music theory and even philosophy, and the language can appear harsh and even offensive to present-day sensibilities (use of terms like 'mongoloid' and 'sub-normal', clinical terms in the last century, illustrate the change in the portrayal of disability over the last 50 years). However the quality that runs through all the work in the collection is the belief in the power of music, the joy that music brought to patients, and the bonds formed between patient and therapist through music.

Juliette Alvin observed that 'music can be adapted to make the best of any ability..., and to suit any emotional or physical [disability]', and through the work of the Society thousands felt the benefit of music in their lives.

