Music Therapy: Using Percussion to Change Lives

By Michael J. Marcionetti and Bill Matney

The field of percussion provides many interesting and rewarding career paths. This PASIC 2010 session will focus on the profession of music therapy, the use of percussion in therapy, and how university-level percussion instructors can best teach music therapy students relevant percussion skill sets.

Throughout recorded history, music has played an integral role in rituals and healing ceremonies in cultures all around the world. The recognized field of music therapy was officially established in 1950 as a therapeutic modality to serve veterans returning from war and trying to cope with physical and psychiatric illnesses as a result of their service. The profession started when volunteers who played music in V.A. hospitals noticed marked improvement in the clients who were participating in the “sessions.” The hospital musicians of the time quickly noted the need for additional clinical training, and universities across the country began to implement programs and offer the necessary training.

Since the beginning of the field, music therapy has grown to develop and research therapeutic interventions and techniques to serve diverse populations including but not limited to mental health, special education, hospice care, medical settings, developmental disabilities, and many more. There are currently 72 universities in the United States offering music therapy degrees recognized by the American Music Therapy Association, and many more universities worldwide.

Music therapists gain a wide variety of musical and therapeutic skills to serve their population. They employ the tools and techniques of music to help clients work toward and complete non-musical and therapeutic goals. Music therapists attend accredited universities to gain their bachelor’s degree and prepare to become board certified. After the completion of a six-month clinical internship, and success in passing their certification exam, they are credentialed to start practicing in the field.

A review of past and current music therapy literature and research demonstrates that percussion is one of the most, if not the most, widely used interactive instrumentation in the field. For this reason, therapists with a strong background in the percussive arts, and who list percussion as a principal area of study, have developed the musical tools necessary to become excellent clinicians. Current university-level percussionists have thorough knowledge and advanced skills related to both rhythm and melody, thus equipping them with some of the tools to facilitate effective music therapy interventions. Percussion students can benefit from learning about music therapy as a career option where they can continue to develop and share their skills.

Additionally, this session will focus on techniques a university percussion professor can teach to best meet the needs of a music therapy student. As evidenced by recent surveys, one of the main concerns of current non-percussionist music therapists is the often-times limited scope of percussion training they receive at the university level. The majority of universities offering music therapy as a major tend to tailor their percussion methods classes to the music education major and focus on symphonic instrumentation. While some symphonic techniques are helpful to music therapy students, many of these skills are difficult to translate to the clinical setting.

Music therapy students can best benefit from exposure and practice in two areas, those being (1) foundational orchestral knowledge and (2) world percussion pedagogy. Foundational orchestral knowledge consists of the essential snare rudiments, fundamental drumset styles, and exposure to pitched percussion, potentially including Orff instrumentation. A focus on world percussion is important because world instrumentation is common in clinical settings. World percussion instrumentation includes instruments from West Africa (djembes, dununs, bells), Cuba (congas, bongos, shakers), the Middle East (frame drums, darbukas, tambourines), and Brazil (pandeiros, surdos).

A current text, Tataku: The Use of Percussion in Music Therapy (www.sarsenpublishing.com), will be highlighted as a curriculum outline for use with music therapy students. This text provides an outline for professors regarding the percussion skill sets required for the training of a successful music therapy student.

For more information on music therapy, visit the American Music Therapy Association website at www.musictherapy.org as well as the Certification Board for Music Therapy at www.cbmt.org.

This presentation will be offered in a fluid...
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format to include lecture, experiential activities, discussion, and question/answer segments. Handouts will be provided to highlight learning points. A number of techniques will be demonstrated with selected audience participation utilizing percussion instruments and applications of percussion to the field. The presenters will highlight specific clinical populations and examples of how music therapists/percussionists can best serve their clients.

Michael J. Marcionetti, MT-BC is a music therapist and the clinical staff supervisor of the Creative Arts Therapy program at Austin State Hospital. He is a published researcher and has assisted in program development for clinical research that utilizes percussion in therapy. He has presented nationally and regionally for AMTA and PAS. Mike maintains a professional performance schedule as a percussionist with a variety of groups.

Bill Matney, MA, MT-BC works full time as a music therapist with a school district special education department, and serves as adjunct lecturer at Texas Woman’s University. He has presented both regionally and nationally on percussion pedagogy and percussion in therapeutic application with clinical populations. Bill authored the book Tataku: The Use of Percussion in Music Therapy, which is currently being used in percussion methods and improvisation courses at universities nationwide.

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