

## MERYC 2019

### Conference Report

After 5 days of networking, workshops and presentations it is hard to know where to begin with a summing up. I expect everyone who attended MERYC19 will be coming away with different things as the scope of the content was vast and our positionalities, which we all brought with us, were so varied. This variety in scope and content is just one of the strengths of the community of practice that emerges from MERYC. There is respectful challenge, a desire to understand what is being said and an openness to listen to opposing stances. What is evident throughout, regardless of standpoints, is that everyone present is passionate about early childhood music, and the drive to share, interrogate and develop is palpable.

To illustrate this I want to share the range of presentations heard in one morning, before coffee break. There were four 20-minute presentations back to back in one room from presenters from Germany, Belgium, England and Austria. Elsewhere in the Ghent central library – De Kroot - other parallel sessions were underway. The morning started with Wilfred Gruhn from the University of Music, Freiburg, Germany, with a presentation of research asserting the strong association between musical ability and motoric skill. Engagingly presented and coming from a Gordon Music Learning Theory perspective, Gruhn shared a series of empirical experiments measuring motor skills, reaction times etc, and then formed a correlation between these results and musical aptitude tests. Gruhn's proposal was that without a brain there is no movement and without movement there is no brain. This raised an interesting discussion with questions such as "is the destination cognition?".

Han Van Regenmortel (Musica, Belgium) was next and he shifted the paradigm from a scientific perspective and moved us into ideas of the artistic, and asked "What is music? When is music?". There was a link with Gruhn's assertion of mind and body, and it was fascinating to re-focus and see these ideas through a different lens. The tensions and intersections between science, art, education and how our intentions shape our approaches can be confusing, Van Regenmortel proposes a flexible framework that challenges the step-by-step methods of musical learning and seeks to find ways to view "how the body learns itself".

Following this Susan Young ( Roehampton, UK) shifts the focus yet again, and invites us to look at neuromyths, neuroscience and how they are reduced down to simplified slogans. Young encourages us to be cautious about the neuroscience discourses – not the science – which condenses complex scientific study into bite size, lowest common denominator slogans which belie the depth and span of the studies. Through a critical theory lens Young warns that this type of marketeering reduces the child into something that it will become, and in particular, how early childhood music is susceptible to this as a modus operandi to advertise, validate and monetise music in the early years to parents. These prolific practices play on parental anxieties to do the right thing and the over-simplification and misrepresentation of scientific evidence results in some very worrying trends.

The last presentation in this group of four was from Veronika Kinsky from Austria who shifted our attention to see the child(ren) as the centre and the beginning of the musical / movement dialogues. Kinsky stated the importance of the teacher in supporting the desires of the children. Skilled adults having the ability to adapt music to the movements and in so making the movement audible were noticing, valuing and supporting the child. By doing this Kinsky states we are saying to the child “I see you, I like you and as you are you are ok.” Kinsky’s research looks at this dialogic music/movement practice through the lens of music therapy and puts music making just for the joy of music making at the heart of it.

This particular morning of presentations felt like a curated journey taking in multiple perspectives, which culminated in lively discussion and debate, as I am sure other parallel sessions evoked too. The in-between times at MERYC also offer hugely valuable opportunity. The coffees, lunches and socialising in the evenings were opportunities to laugh, joke and get to know each other better, but also to share thoughts, feelings and concerns about presentations we had been to, workshops we had attended, and to tease out our responses - what we take away, what we put into the pot, how we connect and position ourselves and to ask ourselves what can this make possible?