Sounds of Intent – by Professor Adam Ockelford

The Sounds of Intent project was set up to see how children and young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) and severe learning difficulties (SLD) – many of whom have a visual impairment – engage with music, and how their musical abilities and interests evolve over time.

In the first year of the project, the preliminary *Sounds of Intent* framework of musical development was tested on around 70 children and young people. Certain changes were made, and, in the second year, 16 pupils in two different schools were observed over a more sustained period using refined and expanded version of the framework that took account of the musical interests and abilities of children and young people with *SLD* as well as PMLD.
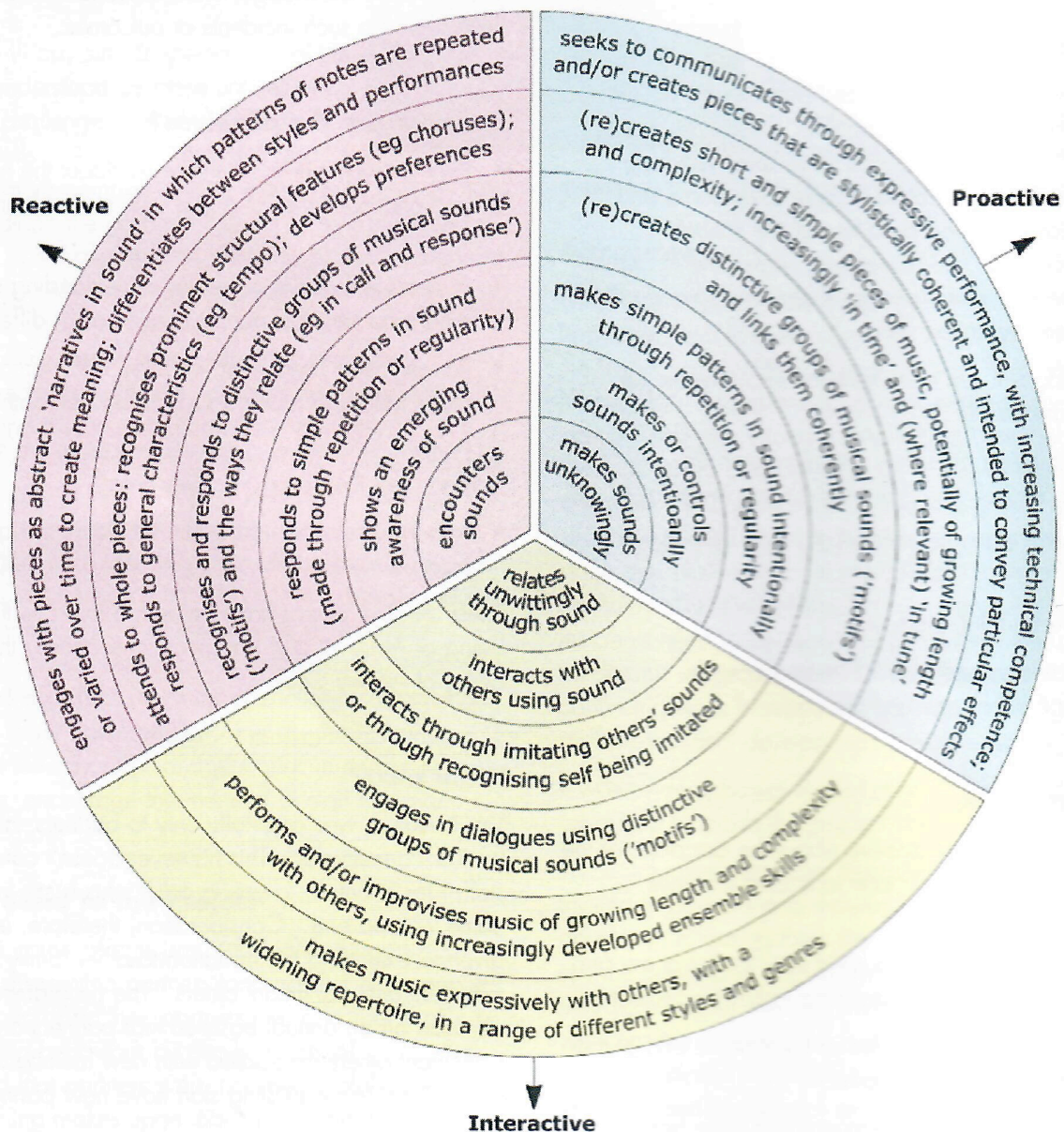

Figure 1 The new *Sounds of Intent* framework

Sounds of Intent

Reactive, Proactive, Interactive

Previous discussion with teachers and therapists had suggested that musical engagement could usefully be classified as 'reactive', 'proactive' or 'interactive'. Examples of 'reactive' musical engagement (i.e. responding to music) include:

- A's teacher notices that he often turns his head towards her when she sings to him. [Reactive, Level 2]

- D cries whenever she hears the 'goodbye' song. [Reactive, Level 5]

- F gets very excited when he hears a regular beat on the school's drum machine. [Reactive, Level 3]

- J's eye movements intensify when he hears the big band play. [Reactive, Level 2]

Examples of 'proactive' musical engagement (i.e. creating, causing or controlling music and musical sounds) include:

- M brushes her left hand against the strings of guitar that someone is holding near to her. There is a pause and then she raises her hand and brushes the strings again, and then for a third time. [Proactive, Level 2]

- P waves her hand more and more vigorously through an ultrasonic beam, creating an ever-wider range of swirling sounds. [Proactive, Level 3]

- R has recently begun to make melodious vowel sounds, which he repeats in short sequences. [Proactive, Level 3]

- S hums distinct patterns of notes and repeats them. Her favourite pattern sounds rather like a playground chant. [Proactive, Level 4]

Examples of 'interactive' musical engagement (that occurs in the context of potential or actual communication) include:

- T's short, sharp vocalisations are interpreted by his teachers and carers to mean that he wants someone to vocalise back to him, although he shows no reaction at all. [Interactive, Level 1]

- U loves 'call and response' games and joins in by making his own sounds. [Interactive, Level 2]

- W copies simple patterns of vocalisation – imitating the ups and downs of her Speech and Language Therapist's voice. [Interactive, Level 3]

- X flaps his hands with delight when his music therapist copies the rhythms he makes on a tambourine. [Interactive, Level 3]

By combining many hundreds of observations like these, the new *Sounds of Intent* framework was created. This took the three ways of engaging with music ('reactive', 'proactive' and 'interactive') and expressed them over six levels, which were represented as a set of circles, with Level 1 innermost and Level 6 outermost. Of course, this is not meant to suggest that musical development can really be divided into hard and fast steps. All development is fuzzy and bound by its context. Instead, the framework is designed to give an *indication* of what may happen, and to be useful to teachers and therapists as they consider how best to support their pupils' engagement with music over time.

Further reading: *Music for Children and Young People with Complex Needs,* by Adam Ockelford, Oxford University Press (2008).

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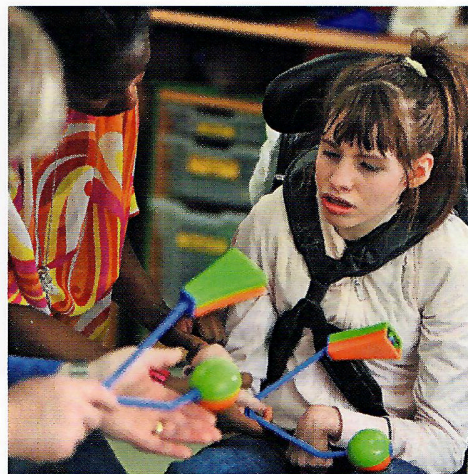
Abigail is supported to imitate sounds using the vibroslap