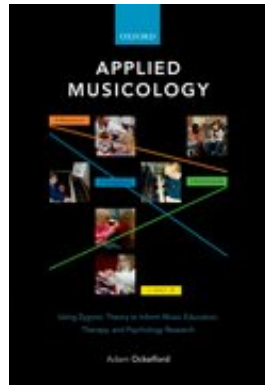


Music: a proxy language for autistic children



Applied Musicology

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BY [ADAM OCKELFORD \(HTTPS://BLOG.OUP.COM/AUTHORS/ADAM-OCKELFORD-2/\)](https://blog.oup.com/authors/adam-ockelford-2/)

DECEMBER 31ST 2012

I spend around 12 hours a week – every week – sharing thoughts, feelings, new ideas, reminiscences and even jokes with some very special children who have extraordinary musical talents, and many of whom are severely autistic. I'm [Professor of Music at the University of Roehampton \(http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/staff/Adam-Ockelford/\)](#), and the children come to see me in a large practice room in Southlands College where there are two pianos, so we don't have to scrap over personal space. My pupils usually indicate what piece they would like us to play together, and they tell me when they've had enough. Sometimes, they tease me by seeming to suggest one thing when they mean another. We share many jokes and the occasional sad moment too.

But the children rarely say a word. They communicate everything through their playing. For them, music is a proxy language.

On Sunday mornings, at 10.00 a.m., I steel myself for Romy's arrival. I know that the next two hours will be an exacting test of my musical mettle. Yet Romy, aged 11, has severe learning difficulties, and she doesn't speak at all. She is musical to the core, though: she lives and breathes music – it is the very essence of her being. With her passion comes a high degree of particularity: Romy knows *precisely* which piece she wants me to play, at what tempo and in which key. And woe betide me if I get it wrong.

When we started working together, four years ago, mistakes and misunderstandings occurred all too frequently, since (as it turned out), there were very few pieces that Romy would tolerate: the theme from *Für Elise* (never the middle section), for example, the Habanera from *Carmen*, and some snippets from 'Buckaroo Holiday' (the first movement of Aaron Copland's *Rodeo*). Romy's acute [neophobia](http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/neophobia) (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/neophobia>) meant that even one note of a different piece would evoke shrieks of fear-cum-anger, and the session could easily grow into an emotional conflagration.

So gradually, gradually, over weeks, then months, and then years, I introduced new pieces – sometimes, quite literally, at the rate of one note per session. On occasion, if things were difficult, I would even take a step back before trying to move on again the next time. And, imperceptibly at first, Romy's fears started to melt away. The theme from Brahms's *Haydn Variations* became something of an obsession, followed by the

slow movement of Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata. Then it was Joplin's *The Entertainer*, and *Rocking All Over the World* by Status Quo.

Over the four years, Romy's jigsaw box of musical pieces – fragments ranging from just a few seconds to a minute or so in length – has filled up at an ever-increasing rate. Now it's overflowing, and it's difficult to keep up with Romy's mercurial musical mind: mixing and matching ideas in our improvised sessions, and even changing melodies and harmonies so they mesh together, or to ensure that my contributions don't!

As we play, new pictures in sound emerge and then retreat as a kaleidoscope of ideas whirls between us. Sometimes a single melody persists for 15 minutes, even half an hour. For Romy, no matter how often it is repeated, a fragment of music seems to stay fresh and vibrant. At other times, it sounds as though she is trying to play several pieces at the same time – she just can't get them out quickly enough, and a veritable nest of earworms wriggle their way onto the piano keyboard. Vainly I attempt to herd them into a common direction of musical travel.

So here I am, sitting at the piano in Roehampton, on a Sunday morning in mid-November, waiting for Romy to join me (not to be there when she arrives is asking for trouble). I'm limbering up with a rather sedate rendition of the opening of Chopin's *Etude* in C major, Op. 10, No. 1, when I hear her coming down the corridor, vocalising with increasing fervour. I feel the tension rising, and as her father pushes open the door, she breaks away from him, rushes over to the piano and, with a shriek and an extraordinarily agile sweep of her arm, elbows my right hand out of the way at the precise moment that I was going to hit the D an octave above middle C. She usurps this note to her own ends, ushering in her favourite Brahms-Haydn theme. Instantly, Romy smiles, relaxes and gives me the choice of moving out of the way or having my lap appropriated as an unwilling cushion on the piano stool. I choose the former, sliding to my left onto a chair that I'd placed earlier in readiness for the move that I knew I would have to make.

I join in the Brahms, and encourage her to use her left hand to add a bass line. She tolerates this up to the end of the first section of the theme, but in her mind she's already moved on, and without a break in the sound, Romy steps onto the set of *A Little Night Music*, gently noodling around the introduction to *Send in the Clowns*. But it's in the wrong key – G instead of E flat – which I know from experience means that she doesn't *really* want us to go into the Sondheim classic, but instead wants me to play the first four bars (and only the first four bars) of Schumann's *Kleine Studie* Op. 68, No. 14. Trying to perform the fifth bar would in any case be futile since Romy's already started to play ... now, is it *I am Sailing* or *O Freedom*. The opening ascent from D through E to G could signal either of those possibilities. Almost tentatively, Romy presses those three notes down and then looks at me and smiles, waiting, and knowing that whichever option I choose will be the wrong one. I just shake my head at her and plump for *O Freedom*, but sure enough Rod Stewart shoves the Spiritual out of the way before it has time to draw a second breath.

From there, Romy shifts up a gear to the *Canon in D* – or is it really Pachelbel's masterpiece? With a deft flick of her little finger up to a high A, she seems to suggest that she wants *Streets of London* instead (which uses the same harmonies). I opt for Ralph McTell, but another flick, this time aimed partly at me as well as the keys, shows that Romy actually wants Beethoven's *Pathétique* theme – but again, in the wrong key (D). Obediently I start to play, but Romy takes us almost immediately to A flat (the tonality that Beethoven originally intended). As soon as I'm there, though, Romy races back up the keyboard again, returning to Pachelbel's domain. Before I've had time to catch up, though, she's transformed the music once more; now we're hearing the famous theme from Dvorak's *New World Symphony*.

I pause to recover my thoughts, but Romy is impatiently waiting for me to begin the accompaniment. Two or three minutes into the session, and we've already touched on 12 pieces spanning 300 years of Western music and an emotional range to match.

Yet here is a girl who in everyday life is supposed to have no 'theory of mind' – the capacity to put yourself in other people's shoes and think what they are thinking. Here is someone who is supposed to lack the ability to communicate. Here is someone who functions, apparently, at an 18-month level.

But I say here is a joyous musician who amazes all who hear her. Here is a girl in whom extreme ability and disability coexist in the most extraordinary way. Here is someone who can reach out through music and touch one's emotions in a profound way.

Romy playing piano with musical savant Derek Paravicini and Adam Ockelford

I explore the science of how Romy and her peers are able to do what they do in my new book *Applied Musicology*, which uses a theory of how music makes sense to all of us to explore intentionality and influence in children who use little or no language. If music is important to us all, it is truly the lifeblood of many children with autism. Essential brain food.

Adam Ockelford is Professor of Music and Director of the Applied Music Research Centre at the University of Roehampton in London. He is the author of *Applied Musicology: Using Zygonic Theory to Inform Music Education, Therapy, and Psychology Research* (<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/product/9780199607631.do>) (OUP, 2012).

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