

*Rounds Corner***Musikalisierung: How a Despondent Mind Shapes Thought into Music: A young boy's journey & music therapy from an insider's point of view****Mike von der Nahmer**¹Edited by Marianna Mott Newirth² and Anita Prestidge¹Leopold Mozart Centre of the University of Augsburg, Germany²River Bend Education District, Minnesota, United States of America**Abstract**

Since the age of six I have dealt with a debilitating depression. Unwilling to simply roll over and let it have at me I've sought to turn the spotlight onto it; to study it, put it into strange places, learn how to understand it and the mechanism driving it. My aim has always been to discover what causes depression to shift or disappear entirely...for a time. Interesting for me was to find a pathway through music. This path has demanded a great deal of attention and energy over the last thirty years and will continue, I imagine, for the next thirty. Depression is both a blessing and a curse, putting me on the course I am on today as a music therapist, sound researcher, composer and maker of transformative theater.

Keywords: *composing, Musikalisierung, monsters, Mary Poppins, music and Words, therapy, depression.*

multilingual abstract | mmd.iammonline.com*Overture:*

Since the age of six I have dealt with a debilitating depression. Unwilling to simply roll over and let it have at me I've sought to turn the spotlight onto it; to study it, put it into strange places, learn how to understand it and the mechanism driving it. My aim has always been to discover what causes depression to shift or disappear entirely...for a time. Interesting for me was to find a pathway through music. This path has demanded a great deal of attention and energy over the last thirty years and will continue, I imagine, for the next thirty. Depression is both a blessing and a curse, putting me on the course I am on today as a music therapist, sound researcher, composer and maker of transformative theater.

Since I began composing at age 12, I have been fascinated by how the state of mind influences creativity. My main research as a music psychotherapist has been to use the composition process with patients as a diagnostic tool as well as a means of therapeutic intervention. This is a logical extension of my work that, for many years, has bridged my interest in and passion for music and science. Most of my

theatrical work deals with the complex operations of the human mind and the human condition. As an example, one of my thesis projects in the Musical Theater Writing program at NYU contained a scene in which a comatose woman reconnects with her daughter by means of music therapy.

This is my work and I want to explain to you what I do and why I do it.

Definitions

Musikalisierung: This is a common German term meaning 'to transform an idea or concept into sound/music,' for example, Beethoven's Symphony No.6 could be considered a Musikalisierung of nature. One can also turn data into sound/music which can be conventional or abstract. I am interested in how a state of mind influences, in a good or a bad way, how music is created.

Composing: For me, composing is developing, organizing and rewriting a musical idea with a focused intention to peel away all the parts that are unrelated until the cell of the thought or idea (a motif, or a specific sound, or orchestral idea, etc.) is revealed and formed into a bigger musical construct. Composing is the transfer and transformation of thought into music.

Depression: Clinical depression has a severe effect on one's ability to compose a new piece of music. It takes away the ability to have a clear thought or idea and it can limit an ability to compose in a variety of styles, such as writing "happy"

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music which does not come easily in the midst of depression. It can also cause feelings of immense insecurity and maybe even forms of delusion preventing any work from getting done. Since much of my work is collaborative, I have also observed my colleague's or student's patterns of behavior that tend toward depression, such as feelings of 'getting stuck' during the writing process. It is because of depression that I am fascinated by the composition process and how collaboration is influenced by our state of mind.

A New Method of Healing Using the Composition Process:

I have developed a new method of using the composition process in a complex way to understand how composition can be provided as a healing tool for patients with a variety of diagnoses. My aim is to see, once I understand how the mind creates a certain way of composing, if there is an individual way of helping my patients find new paths. By using a guided process I map a connection between the probing exploration of a theme, melody, instrumentation or acoustical space to create a multifaceted musical approach. I narrow down the specific and varied meanings, similar to the way I compose, which helps to facilitate my understanding of the patient. I then help my patient shape a new context for their situation. In this article it is my intention to explain where my ideas originate and demonstrate, in a most personal way, how they have shaped my understanding of musical creation and language of the mind.

In each session I follow a certain procedure which I have developed over several years.

There are three important parts within the composition process regarding the music.

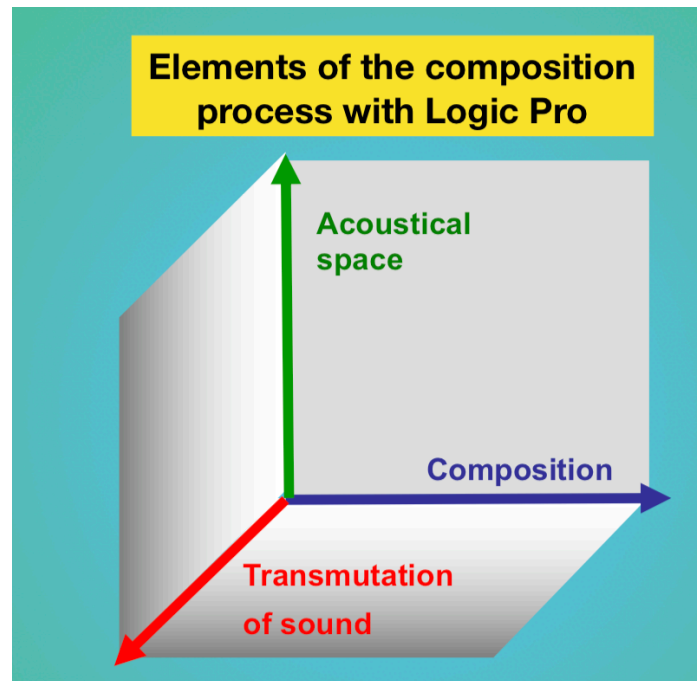
The meaning of each instrument/part of the composition

	Score	Explanation by the patient
alto flute		General indifference. „I am feeling indifferent“
gong		„The sound wants something. It calls for my attention, prompting me to... something... but I don't allow it to penetrate my psyche.“
cymbal		„The threat wants to create fear. It wants to frighten me, but it can't win Against the indifference.“

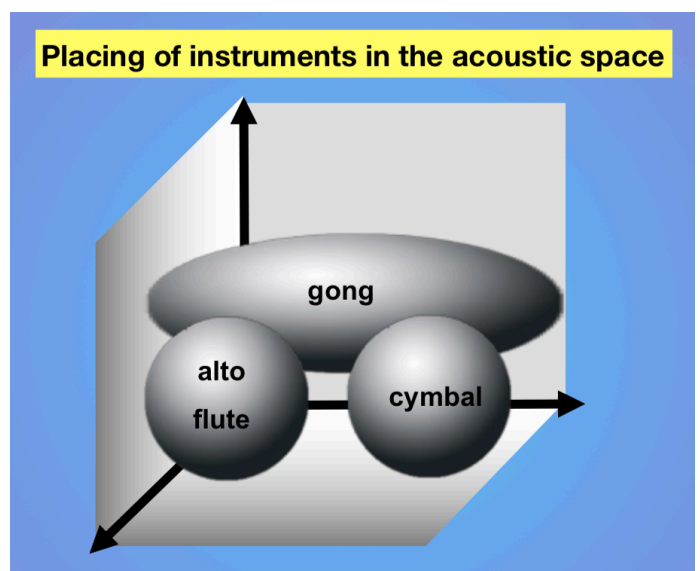
- Composition with symbolization of all instruments and parts
- Musical effect (the quality of the different elements within a conflict)
- The placing of those instruments/sound within the room

Another important aspect in the composition process is the use of musical effects such as distortion/pitch shifter, which gives the patient another way of conveying specific

qualities of the conflict. For example, I may ask, “Is this a perfect representation of the sound you are trying to create? Should we change the volume? Or compress or elongate the sound?”



Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I ask my patient to place this sound within the room we are in together. “Is it a sound that is shifting from left to right, right to left, is it just steady, is it more in the back or overcrowding all of the other sounds?” These are critical questions that point to the various solutions I can offer.



Methodological challenge:

The key question for my methodology is, what can I learn about another human being (who may have little or no musical background) through his/her way of creating an internal musical world? That is, how can I turn them into a “composer” for purposes of communicating with me? Composition is a problem-solving skill. Once you set a note, create a motif or other musical structure, you determine your own set of rules. These rules then create a certain melodic, harmonic, rhythmic language and texture. In communicating with me, therefore, every part of my patients’ composition receives a significant symbolization.

Further Objectives:

My theory of this composition process is in an experimental phase and does not have a control group. The focus right now is on recreating sounds. Many will ask, “Will anything interesting come out of this work?” and it is a good question. I believe it may, and if so, then the next step to take will be a more clinical approach. I would then like to share my work with psychologists, psychiatrists, and others to see if it generates further clinical investigation and applications. This is my intention as I pursue this project. I will need to work out basic methodological challenges with regard to how patients communicate with those seeking to listen to and record the sounds in their minds. I consider this challenge integral to the recording itself.

This article is a culmination of my insights and research as I have described them above. In the remaining sections of this article I offer myself as a self-aware subject, analyzing depression as it took hold in my young boy’s mind and observing how Miky tried to cope. As one who experiences extreme depression first-hand I know the mechanisms of music therapy that can be used to a patient’s benefit. The following is my humble attempt to give you a point of view from inside depression, how it took hold and how its grip can be broken by the effects and benefits of music therapy.

This is in service of providing a deepened awareness of the work we all do in this field.

The Story of Miky’s Monsters*In the Beginning...before depression moved in as a permanent tenant*

Miky was born into a safe and loving household, growing well and healthy for the first three years of his life. His young days were spent partly in Munich and partly in the Austrian alps. His mother was a very busy and successful sound engineer, his father a healer, artist and Hindu priest. Like any other child at that age Miky seemed to develop and thrive. His parents fostered his creativity through playing outside and allowing him to discover his environment, surrounded by nature. After those three blissful years of comfort for the boy, things shifted as arguments between his parents grew strong and disruptive.

Music introduction...pain and fear in the real world that made a door in the mind

At the age of four Miky was introduced to recorder and piano by his grandmother. This was not a happy introduction as she would hit on his fingers when Miky would play wrong notes. Whether it was through terror or a deep seated and inexplicable love the boy kept with his music studies. While his grandmother tried her best to connect with her grandson through music her strictness created much fear in Miky. He would wake in the middle of the night with nightmares about his grandmother coming to him, finally falling back to sleep relieved at the realization that the bad dream was not real.

Frequent trips to India and Saturn...inheritance of a mindset

Miky’s father was a highly intelligent and charismatic person from a well-known German family of scientists. Often he would talk about the frequent trips he’d just taken to India (where he’d never been because he’d never actually gone anywhere) and other far-off places...like Saturn where he’d visit with the help of his alien friends. This had seemed to be a lovely and interesting thing to Miky - a young boy fascinated by magic - but it was a source of grave concern to Miky’s mother. His father’s gregarious ways allowed him to connect with like-minded people and eventually landed him a spot on Austrian television where he talked about aliens and alien abduction on a program called UFO’s & Alien Encounters. Here he discussed aliens and alien abduction on a national platform. It was impossible for Miky to discern what was real and what was delusional on his father’s part.

Hatred in the real world made manifest in the mind

While imagined trips to India and Saturn could have been seen as harmless and amusing, they became entrenched behavioral problems. Miky could feel his mother’s increasing sorrow as his parents’ marriage fell apart before him but the young child was unable to fix it. Added to this stressful situation was his father’s endless vitriolic and expressive hatred of Germans. Young Miky internalized all this sorrow and hatred, merging it with his own pain and confusion. The boy didn’t quite know how to respond and was finally left with a persistent thought that maybe there was something intrinsically wrong with him that should be hated, too.

First grade offense...school

Miky came into first grade and in the beginning was praised for his intellect. It was soon discovered that written language could be confusing for certain minds like his; Miky was only much later diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD. The child once considered smart and hailing from a family of brilliant scientists, was soon declared mentally and intellectually behind. He went more and more into hiding in school with a growing fear of his teachers. He would rather pee his pants in class than ask to go the restroom. His mother, doing the best

she could, assumed the teachers were the experts in education and she never questioned or pushed back at them and their assessment of her boy.

The first attack...pain and fear in the imagined world

One day Miky felt a strange sensation. He was playing with his toys when suddenly a strange feeling arose inside him, a shadow of unimaginable heaviness settled in and took over his chest. It felt to him as if many creatures, monsters full of bad and heavy thoughts, had taken over both body and mind. Miky was unable to form any clear thoughts. He could not distinguish between his authentic voice and a streak of silent repeating incomprehensible voices causing great mental pain. It came all at once as if someone had flipped on a switch that started a grey, heavy sadness. Fear had been his frequent companion up to now but this was something new. This was something he couldn't put into words. This was something that made no sense at all to the young boy. This was deeply alarming.

Mary Poppins as antidepressant

This strange, indescribably terrifying feeling for the young boy stayed heavily in his chest the entire evening until he finally would be asked by his mother to take a shower and go to bed. Miky had just seen Mary Poppins (the movie version from 1964) and while standing in the shower he would remember one of the songs that he felt oddly connected to, "Supercalifragilisticexpialidetic" (the movie he'd watched was translated into German.) He didn't know why he felt a connection he just knew he felt one. Maybe because it was the musicalisation of his feelings about written language and how often it wouldn't make any sense to him...that was a thought for a later time in his life. Whatever it was in this moment he slowly started to sing "Supercalifragilisticexpialidetic" humming the rest "hm hm hm hm hm hm...". He felt a bit better. It wasn't the length of the word, there are many long words in German, it was that the word itself made absolutely no sense. It had a fascinating sound and that sound had a calming effect on him. If you were to have asked at that moment he could have said that the word itself understood his mind, as if Miky and the nonsensical word had gone into resonance. The boy repeated the line and sang faster and faster until he'd made it into his own musical mantra. All of a sudden the grey and heavy sadness left, as if the switch had been flipped to off. He should never forget this moment in which he would be able to use music and words to get out of his inner cycle of darkness and from that moment on Miky would start to see and hear the purpose of music in a very different way. Music had the power to make him feel better.

Monsters move in

This moment made the monsters go away for a while and leave him happy, singing and in tune with the world but it was not to last long. The next time his shadow tenants made a visit

they would come in force and stay for good. Ten years pass and the boy continued dealing with depression while learning more about music. He was starting to analyze his own mind and feelings while improvising and composing in hopes that he would be able to recreate the relief he had experienced by singing a simple Mary Poppins tune... "Supercalifragilisticexpialidetic."

In 1992 at the age of 15, when music therapy was rather unknown in Germany, Miky had an obsession for connecting musical composition and medicine. He learned as much as a young boy could by doing practical training in medicine at hospitals, going to introductory courses in music therapy, secretly auditing medical courses at the University in Munich and so on. He was also becoming very good in composition. Miky was on the path now and he would go on to a musical high school, continuing his classical modern music and dramatic pieces but also writing healing pieces to be performed at hospitals by himself and with his classmates.

The Question that leads to more questions

While there would be many questions that would run through the boy's mind, one question came to define Miky's life-long question and journey:

How does the mental state translate into music through composition and in which way do these states, especially depression, interfere with or even destroy musical creation?

Miky was entrenched with depression and a driving mission to connect musical composition and medicine. Soon he developed concepts about the possibilities of healing mind and body with music, such as using specific frequencies to impact certain areas in the body. He learned about Indian music and Chakras. This served further connections to his past as he had grown up with Indian music and played the Veena, introduced by his father. He was now thinking about the problem of staying in one's own mental cycles when improvising or trying to search for new musical worlds. This led to more questions about the general idea of understanding a mind and its thought process through the way person creates music.

Now a teenager, Miky became Mike and he flourished despite depression by leading a popular band called *Authentic Dreams* while he worked on his first one-act opera in 10th grade titled, 'Between Delusion and Reality.' His modern opera was about a young boy who had fallen deeply in love with a creature half animal, half woman but their love had no chance of survival and one day she would become an eagle and he would never see her again. This was how Mike coped with the inevitable teenaged angst of unrequited love. His early piece also evidenced the internal work he was doing with the dualization of two divergent parties. One party was trying to convince him there was a good purpose in life, while the other party showed him only the destruction and

meaninglessness of life. The monster party kept telling him there would be nothing to do but shut down his perception and close out the world. Their argument was very compelling.

In the world, Mike found people who believed in his talents. The young composer was a rehearsal pianist for young singers. He ended up conducting a choir, a small chamber ensemble and trio where he played piano. More and more of his compositions were performed and the audience, accustomed to hearing light pieces from young optimistic musicians, were uncomfortable with dark work about a young boy who basically decided life had no purpose. What was uncomfortable for the audience was a pathway to freedom for the young composer whose world had now become filled with a driving purpose. Music and words were Mike's medium; he was able to express how a mind might feel.

Yesterday gives me Today...from third person into a personal narrative

Today I am a professional composer. I have spent my life dealing with depression while I work worldwide writing concerts, musicals, operas and scoring film. On numerous occasions I've had to compose music with the monsters in my mind telling me strongly, "You are the worst composer to have lived. Your music sounds like crap. You will never ever be able to finish a piece..." and so on. As my survival depends on composing, I constantly deal with my mind monsters. I go through the same process every time I'm hired for a new piece and I always look for ways to quiet my monster tenants.

Mary Poppins Makes A Return

A couple of years ago I had a particularly notable moment. Sleep deprived from a long year of constant composing, I had a large dramatic work to finish with a deadline that was looming dangerously before me. One night I was working, pounding against my piano for hours writing one bad song after the other. I felt there was absolutely no creativity left in my mind and the weight of the hopeless world weighed heavily in my chest. I stopped pounding, too exhausted to continue, and looked at my songs. I knew I was a good composer who had been doing this for many years. I knew what I was capable of and most of all I had evidence of written pieces that were really quite *good*! So I asked the question; "What is the difference between those good pieces I had written and this crap? Why is what I've just written so bad?"

I pulled out an opera written several years before to acclaimed success and I looked at my music - not as composer but as musicologist and music therapist. There on the page was a very, very simple and profound difference. All the pieces I had written that day had flat melodies. The rhythm and the harmonies were fine but the melody reflected the way I had been feeling, basically tired and numb. There was no life, there were no up and downs, no interesting falls or jumps, no motifs that would show a growing idea pulsating and developing through the piece.

Looking at my opera I saw life in that score, all the ups and downs and twirls and spins, so my music therapist-self spoke to my composer-self and said: "Let's try an experiment. You have to finish this piece today. People tomorrow need to rehearse what you have written. Why not just try and bring more up and down here? Why not just try and bring more movement into your melody *even though* you don't feel like moving at all?" After only a couple of minutes with this experiment something shifted and I suddenly broke free of the monster's weight. I literally had just composed myself out of my depression in that moment. The analytical process of restarting my brain, to compose myself out of the mind patterns that had taken me down, helped reboot my mind. Almost 20 years after my first experience with Mary Poppins I had consciously brought myself forth out of depression. This answered some of the questions that I knew where there but hadn't fully understood up to now. I had developed and researched numerous ways of using composition and the composition process in music therapy, now I saw the mechanism and I began to work on my master thesis.

Moving ahead in life:

The questions of a young Miky are the essential inquiries that keep Mike moving ahead in life. As my research continues so do my questions: "Can I compose music in a certain way so I can help with specific problems of the mind? How can I find a way to compose and create music outside what is known to me? If there are certain things that shine through different kinds of disharmonies of the mind, would there be a way to use the composition process to affect the mind in certain ways?" My work continues to evolve as I search for new ways to connect music with words and theater. Now I am able to mentor others in music theater writing and creating transformative theater that frees the mind. The questions will continue throughout the remainder of my life as they open up the world for me and those I connect with.

Biographical Statements

Peter Michael von der Nahmer is a composer, sound researcher, music therapist and maker of transformative music theater based in New York City. His American/German/Cuban heritage influences the questions of identity, complexity, and transcendent connection that shape his music. He has written over 30 works for music theater and dance, and over 100 works for concert and film; many have received national/international awards, and been performed around the world. Most recently he was awarded the 2016 McKnight Visiting composer residency, where he created new musical theater pieces with and about the people of New Ulm, MN focusing on the German-American history. In June 2017 he received an honorable mention by the New York

Philharmonic in the New World Composition Challenge with his piano piece “From Here to There”.

Mike holds a B.A. in composition from the University of Music and Performing Arts, Munich and an M.A. in Music Therapy from the University of Augsburg. He holds certificates in Film Scoring from the UCLA, and in Music Pain Treatment from the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences. In May 2015, he received an M.F.A. in Musical

Theater Writing from New York University, where he held a Tisch School of the Arts Departmental Fellowship.

Mike’s barrier-breaking, eclectic background explains his passion for music both as artistic expression and as a means to connect disparate cultures. His desire to be an agent of radical connection – to literally create harmony out of apparent dissonance – is his defining motivation.