

TRIBUTE

# In Memory of Rosemary Ganzert Fischer: Reflections and Inspirations

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Received 18 October 2023; Accepted 3 November 2023; Published 1 March 2024

Editor: Helen Brenda Oosthuizen

## Abstract

Dr. Rosemary Ganzert Fischer (1932-2021) was a pioneer of Canadian music therapy. She began the *Bachelor of Music Therapy* programme at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), Waterloo, Ontario in 1986. This article describes her contributions to Canadian music therapy. It also contains memories of our time working and teaching together and the inspirations we shared. Rosemary's legacy to Canadian music therapy should be remembered. The dedication she brought to her work and teachings at WLU inspired a generation of music therapists who are now actively working and standing on the shoulders of her contributions to the field.

**Keywords:** Wilfrid Laurier University; Canadian Association of Music Therapy; music therapy pedagogy; improvisation; music therapy; musicology

## Reflections on Rosemary Ganzert Fischer

Rosemary Ganzert Fischer was born in Toledo, Ohio in 1932. She earned a bachelor of music degree from Oberlin Conservatory and a master of music therapy from The University of Michigan. She later received a doctorate of education from the University of Georgia. After teaching music at Limestone College, Gaffney, South Carolina and completing her graduate degree, Rosemary began her career as a music therapist working at Charles Lea Center, Spartanburg, South Carolina. Later, after completing her doctoral studies she became music therapy professor at East Carolina University, Greenville. Some years later, Rosemary relocated to Canada to establish the *Bachelor of Music Therapy* (BMT) programme at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), Waterloo, Ontario, which began in 1986. During her time at WLU the BMT programme gained national standing and helped define standards of practice that would influence the future of undergraduate education in Canada. After retiring from WLU she was awarded the lifetime achievement *Norma Sharpe Award*, granted by the Canadian Association of Music Therapists (CAMT). Rosemary

subsequently moved to Mebane, Alamance County, North Carolina in order to be closer to her family and grandchildren. She continued working as a music therapist with *The Music Makers* and was actively involved in a number of productions with her local community theatre, *Studio I*.<sup>1</sup> She also taught at Alamance Community College and directed her local choir, *The Celebration Singers*.<sup>2</sup> Rosemary died in 2021.

My first meeting with Rosemary was in 1998, when I was invited to teach on the BMT programme at WLU. The following year, I applied for a full-time academic music therapy position at the university and was appointed as Associate Professor. In the beginning, I remember being struck by her empathy, strength and passion. All of these attributes continued and intensified as our relationship and subsequent friendship matured. Working alongside Rosemary was a powerful experience that not only influenced my teaching, but also my developing theories and research. She became one of my closest friends as well as one of my keenest professional collaborators. Rosemary taught me how to manage the political forays of the university and how best to promote music therapy as an essential part of the faculty of music. My memories of our time together at WLU are tinged with the power of creating and challenging perceived norms of practice and teaching, that culminated in the beginnings of the *Master of Music Therapy* (MMT) programme in 2002.

From the beginning of the BMT programme, Rosemary embraced the Herculean task of preparing and teaching all courses, arranging and supervising placements, as well as advocating for music therapy in the faculty of music and broader Waterloo-Kitchener community. In 1993, she also began and developed with Leslie O'Dell, Ruth Priddle, and Lana-Lee Hardacre, *Arts Express*.<sup>3</sup> As the years passed and as more students graduated from the programme, placement supervisors and part-time teachers were appointed. I can only imagine what a relief it must have been for Rosemary to be able to share the academic and placement load as the programme developed and flourished. Her strength and fortitude during these inagural years was indeed inspiring.

Rosemary was a born teacher. In classes, she balanced theory, knowledge, research and practice<sup>4</sup> with a level professionalism that would influence generations of Canadian music therapists to come. One of the main challenges of creating a strong and sound music therapy pedagogy is the ability to share with students in lectures the tenets of clinical knowledge and evidence-based practice, alongside the creativity, empathy, and emotional openness needed for placements. Rosemary achieved this balance with dignity and grace. Structure, preparation, passion, and therapeutic freedoms were all central to her teachings. For Rosemary, being a teacher and being a therapist were inextricably intertwined. Rosemary afforded all the students she worked alongside the dedication and focus that she would bring equally to her work with clients.

During my formative years at WLU as the initial MMT programme document was prepared and passed through the various stages of accreditation, Rosemary was my constant companion. Even though she had officially retired as a full-time faculty member she continued working alongside me in her capacity as a part-time teacher, advisor, supervisor, and accompanist. This was a time of overwhelming work, documentation, and committees. Rosemary was always there at my side to offer support and kind words of encouragement. When I expressed my vulnerabilities she listened intently, and when I expressed my excitement she danced with joy.

Once the programme officially began Rosemary and I co-taught music-centered courses<sup>5</sup> that would become central to the musicological foundations for the MMT's developing pedagogy. Her passion exploring improvisation and how the theoretical principles of musical form and freedom could be adapted to sessions with clients was inspiring. She writes:

I personally came into the field from the perspective of a chamber music pianist and accompanist for my husband who was a violinist. After turning to music therapy at a

relatively late age, I always kept a separation between my musical self and my music therapist self. Although I was aware that my music therapist self, operated best when my musical self was at its best I never made a direct connection between the two.<sup>6</sup>

As Rosemary further explored the connection between her musical self and therapeutic self in practice and classes, our creativity and teachings took flight. We would prepare for students passages and distillations from composers such as Samuel Barber and use them as exercises for teaching and promoting musical resources for student's placements. Rosemary loved the music of Barber and I remember her sharing how, in her earlier life, she had accompanied her husband as he performed the *Violin Sonata in F Minor*. These transcriptions were created to highlight the importance of combining music and therapy as equal partners in the therapeutic process. This was the beginning of an approach we developed together defined as music therapy composer-studies. This musicological methodology has continued in my work and writings to this day. Each class we co-taught together was carefully planned and I feel blessed and honoured to have this time working alongside Rosemary.

Some of my strongest memories of Rosemary come from a time when I began formulating my ideas for *aesthetic music therapy*. Creating a programme based on musicological principles created doubts and uncertainties for some students. They sought answers to questions that I didn't always have responses for. Indeed, at this time, I was also questioning how a music-centred indigenous theory could be created that would include and balance the non-musical parameters of outcomes and evidence-based practice. Being open and authentic as a composer, pianist, and teacher brought with it insecurities that I felt, at that time, I needed to keep private. I remember sharing with Rosemary, my only confidant, these doubts. Rosemary's response was always to smile, address me as "sunshine," and let me know that music was at the heart of all our work. If I kept music as my central anchor all would be good. Words were critical but music was heaven sent! She was, of course, right. Her belief and clarity in the central role of music during my time at WLU guided me and kept me secure.

I would like to take a brief moment here to share our love of J. S. Bach and how she felt that the implications of his music could have far reaching consequences for music therapy. Rosemary's connection to Bach I believe came from her work as a chamber musician and being an accompanist for her husband as a violinist. We explored the transcendental and spiritual qualities of Bach's music and wondered, in awe, as to how music of such magnitude could be created by a single human being. We mused that his was truly *music of the spheres!* Further, I shared with her my love of British baroque and contemporary string music, most notably Henry Purcell and Gerald Finzi, and she introduced me to American composers such as Howard Hanson and, of course, Samuel Barber. I cherish these inspired musical dialogues and remember them with great affection. These private musical exchanges were central to our developing friendship and professional relationship.

Rosemary exuded musical creativity and sensitivity. The musical phrase, for her, was the heartfelt expression of humanity. In our time together at WLU we explored how the silence before music and the beginnings of tone and form combined to create a musical-therapeutic alliance that could affect change and positive musical connections for clients. Through improvisations we explored the joy of life and the pain of loss. Rosemary would always speak of her passions of teaching and her belief that every student had, in fact, been her own personal teacher guiding her as the BMT programme had developed. We jokingly spoke of how we often felt like imposters in the university and that one day the academic police would come and arrest us! Even though Rosemary was focussed and serious in her teachings she was also lighthearted and fun. She expressed to me on many occasions how blessed she felt in being able to work as a music therapist and educator and her dedication to the BMT programme at WLU.

It was a painful time for Rosemary when at 65, she was forced to retire from WLU as a full-time faculty member.<sup>7</sup> She felt her work had not been completed and desperately wanted to continue teaching and being a part of the advances in music therapy at WLU. Teaching for Rosemary was a lifeline and I know how much it hurt her and that she could not carry on with her work. Her leaving was difficult for us both and I struggled daily on how best to support her as my colleague and friend. In passing the torch to me after she had left, I often felt the weight of her expectations for the future of both the BMT and MMT programmes.

As our time together came to an end we discussed the future of music therapy programmes at WLU. We also explored developing trends nationally and internationally and the work of the Canadian Association of Music Therapy. This was a time when new methods and approaches were being defined. We mused on the connections between music therapy and musicology, the inspirations of music, and how a music-centred indigenous theory might develop in the future. I have strong memories of talking, playing and brainstorming new and contentious ideas and approaches. We discussed the balance between structure and freedom, improvisations and song, and our ultimate belief that clinical and artistic *form* was central to our clinical work and teachings.

Rosemary's place in Canadian music therapy history needs to be remembered. It is often said that we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us. In the years we were together at the university, I often felt inadequate to fulfill the work she had started. After she had retired and left WLU, I remember every morning considering, when faced with adversities, what she would have done. My contribution to the programmes at Laurier could not have been possible without her love, dedication, and friendship. Rosemary's shoulders were indeed broad and brimming with musical inventiveness. I hope in some small way during my tenure at WLU, I rose to the challenge that she set me as an educator, musician, and therapist.

Rosemary was a nonconformist. She lived in music and music lived in her. For the years we worked together at WLU music was a core that connected us both as colleagues and friends. We would talk, play music together, and share our thoughts and values on the relationship between music, therapy, art, and life. These experiences left an indelible impression on me and would continue to influence my work and teachings long after Rosemary left WLU. To end I would like to share a short quote by Rosemary followed by a recording I made of the folk song *The Water is Wide*. This interpretation is part improvised, and part song-based. This recording is dedicated to Rosemary and speaks better than I can through words, my thanks for her support and love.

The challenge is in the journey and I have "set my sails"<sup>8</sup> ...

["Musical reflection for Rosemary"](#)

## About the Author

**Colin Andrew Lee** studied piano at the Nordwestdeutsche Musikakademie and subsequently earned his postgraduate diploma in music therapy from the Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy Centre, London. Colin was awarded the Music Therapy Charity research fellowship completing his doctoral thesis on the analysis of improvisations with people living with HIV/AIDS. He continued his clinical work at Sir Michael Sobell House Hospice, Oxford. After immigrating to North America, Colin taught at Berklee College of Music, Boston and later at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. Following the publication of *Music at the Edge: The Music Therapy Experiences of a Musician with AIDS* (1996 & 2016), he subsequently created the theory of aesthetic music therapy that was the subject of Colin's monograph *The Architecture of Aesthetic Music Therapy* (2003). Recent research interests include the musicological analysis of postminimalist composers and their influence on the study of applied health musicology. Colin is currently editing *The Oxford Handbook of Queer and Trans Music Therapy*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Studio 1* is a performing arts centre in Burlington, North Carolina.

<sup>2</sup> *Celebration Singers* are a choir based in Burlington, North Carolina.

<sup>3</sup> *Arts Express* is an inclusive creative arts day-camp for children that combines the principles of community music therapy and community music. University students get course credit for leading the camp, which culminates in a final performance at WLU. For further details on *Arts Express* see: Mitchell, E. (2016) *Arts Express: Performance, community, and creativity for children*. *Topics for Music Education Praxis*. <http://topics.maydaygroup.org/articles/2016/Mitchell2016.pdf>  
Mitchell, E. (2021). Musical identities, personal identities: Performance for children with disabilities. In L. Willingham (Ed.), *Community music at the boundaries* (pp. 315–333). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Fischer, R. (1991). Original song drawings in the treatment of a developmentally disabled, autistic adult. In K. E. Bruscia (Ed.) *Case studies in music therapy* (pp. 359–372). Barcelona Publishers.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemary and I co-taught the following core music-centred courses as the MMT program at WLU began: *Talks on Music* and *Clinical Improvisation 1–4*.

<sup>6</sup> This passage is taken from Rosemary's foreword for: Lee, C. A. (2003). *The architecture of Aesthetic Music Therapy* (p. x). Barcelona Publishers.

<sup>7</sup> At this time in Ontario universities the mandatory retirement age was 65.

<sup>8</sup> This final sentence is taken from Rosemary's foreword for: Lee, C. A. (2003). *The architecture of Aesthetic Music Therapy* (p. x). Barcelona Publishers.