

BOOK REVIEWS AND BOOK ESSAYS | PEER REVIEWED

Nordoff & Robbins and the Art of Time: A Review of Music, Time, and Self: A Time Model for Nordoff-Robbins Clinical Improvisation by Tamar Hadar

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Abstract

“Nordoff & Robbins and the Art of Time” is a review of the book *Music, Time, and Self: A Time Model for Nordoff-Robbins Clinical Improvisation*, by Tamar Hadar with co-author Dr. Kenneth Aigen. This book is the seventh volume in the Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy Monograph Series, published by Barcelona in 2025.

Keywords: Nordoff-Robbins music therapy; improvisation; temporality

I recall a moment during my Nordoff-Robbins training when Clive Robbins gathered everyone present to recreate the musical story *Pif-Paf-Poltrie*. I was annoyed. While I found both the music and story very compelling, it was now the third time we had been asked to participate in this (spontaneously announced) activity and as a stressed-out student frantically racing to the graduation finish line, I simply did not have *time*. *Pif-Paf-Poltrie* took so *long*. It was so *slow*. But, of course, I participated. And, as in each previous *Pif*, I found myself drawn into an experience of outward focus and connection where I was no longer concerned with (or even aware of) the ticking of the clock. Swept up in the musical narrative, I noticed a change in my internal pace. My attention shifted, my mood turned, and I felt a sense of joyful cooperation with the other participants. Indeed, I sensed they felt this too. *We just did something to time*, I thought then. In fact, we had just done something *with* time.

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In music we are drawn into time differently. While playing or listening we may experience time as expanded, compressed, suspended, or transformed in other ways. But it is not just time that is transformed—we often experience ourselves as transformed in musical time as well. As music therapists, our work is carried out in musical time, within extramusical time containers: the allotted time for the session, the number of sessions, the semester, the school year. What can be accomplished within these time structures? And how can we capture the weight of time? We often ask ourselves: *Did we use time well? Was it wasted? What do we have time for?* What potentials for growth, development, and healing exist within the musical treatment of time?

It is in the context of these questions that Tamar Hadar has situated her monograph, *Music, Time, and Self: A Time Model for Nordoff-Robbins Clinical Improvisation*. In this seventh volume in the Nordoff Robbins monograph series¹, Hadar continues the series' exploration of the approach by examining the early work of Nordoff and Robbins (NR), analysing the recordings of their work with ten children through the lens of cognitive developmental theories, couched in a phenomenological exploration of musical time. By taking a general feature of music (temporality) and focusing on its specific treatment within a single approach (NR), Hadar both pulls readers into a detailed exploration of the world of NR and demonstrates its relevance for other music therapy approaches. This text is not only for the NR music therapist: it is for anyone who is interested in how musical togetherness is accomplished in and through time.

Each generation of Nordoff-Robbins music therapists approaches their early recordings with new lenses, questions, concerns, and priorities. Hadar asks how a focus on a single dimension of music—time—provides new insights into their pioneering work with children, and how those insights may have implications for the way we conceptualize musical relationship and communication—anchoring themes in the NR approach. Her aim is to trace Nordoff's musical techniques in terms of their temporality and link them to his clinical decision-making process. Hadar is one of very few authors to systematically analyse the early material of Nordoff and Robbins², and, interestingly, she came to these recordings not as an “insider,” but as a psychodynamically-trained music therapist, one with a previous interest in improvisation and music's temporality. Whilst stating that all original contributions to theory are her own, she also includes Dr. Kenneth Aigen—a well-established scholar of music therapy theory and the NR approach—as a co-author, implying that he has contributed through reflection and commentary.

After a brief introduction that outlines the chapters that follow, Chapter 1 provides a theoretical foundation for the relationship between music and time. Hadar introduces this relationship through the philosophers Bergson (1966) and Schutz (1951), emphasizing the ways in which people experience togetherness in time, consequently setting the stage with a concept of time that emphasizes its social dimensions. She then pivots to theories of cognition, drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) schema theory and Stern's (2000) psychodevelopmental theory of self to discuss how human development happens within the context of time: our social interactions unfold in time, and these actions and interactions form the basis for our cognitive development.

The next five chapters present the four stages of Hadar's time model—a novel contribution to NR theory which warrants a detailed summary here. Included in these

¹The Nordoff-Robbins Monograph Series (published by Barcelona) includes six previous volumes, in varied formats (e.g., qualitative studies, memoir, dialogue) and on different topics (e.g., NR foundations, history, processes, applications, specific clinical issues).

²A notable example being *Paths of development in Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy* by Dr. Kenneth Aigen.

chapters are the analyses of recordings of Nordoff and Robbins' work with ten children³, excerpts of which are accessed through a website link. Nordoff's musical-clinical decisions and techniques are then categorized within four phases, spanning a spectrum ranging from incipient musical awareness to musical independence and mutuality. Chapter two presents the first phase in the time model: "*augmented time*," in which Nordoff created a "primary temporal expectation" (p.24) for the child through the use of pauses, musical space, and antiphonal playing. Chapter three presents the second time phase, "*playing in synchronization*," in which Nordoff encouraged the child to enter into a musical interaction around a more complex musical structure; this took the form of simultaneous singing and/or playing, meeting around a common beat, and/or extending periods of synchronized play. Chapter four presents the third time phase, termed "*emotional time*." In this phase, Nordoff supported the children's exploration of their "inner, primary connection to music" (p.44) through spacious, often unmetred musical moments, where he provided the musical scaffolding for the child to explore the relationship between self and world. Chapter five serves as something of an interlude in which Hadar demonstrates the ways in which Nordoff moved between time phases in order to support the child's development. Chapter six presents time phase four, "*synchronization discrepancies*," characterized by a high degree of musical agency and reciprocal engagement. Within each chapter, Hadar's analysis links the time phases to specific cognitive schemas and clinical goals, showing the reader how musical exploration was linked to clinical intent.

The next two chapters consist of theoretical and practical implications of the time model. In chapter seven, Hadar discusses her findings through a lens she describes as a "psychodynamic-developmental context" which she draws from Stern, whose theory of the layered self describes infant development in terms of relational and communicative qualities and events. The conclusions Hadar arrives at here are perhaps not that different than those of other thinkers who have drawn on Stern and others (i.e., Trevarthen & Malloch's [2000] *communicative musicality*), but the focus on music's temporality is unique. Chapter eight lists the implications and recommendations for music therapists. Hadar offers several tools to help the music therapist relate the different temporal phases to clinical goals and plan individualized temporal interventions. The reader is encouraged to analyse improvisations using NR's indexing strategy, as this method of analysis is key to understanding the details and nuances of temporal musical engagement. Hadar ends the monograph with an epilogue describing the ways in which she employed the time model in her own clinical practice, giving the reader a practitioner's "testimony" in addition to the case she presents as scholar and researcher. Of note is the fact that she herself completed the NR training following the study and now works within the approach.

Each student of the NR approach must grapple with the enormity and complexity of Nordoff's improvised music, and one is easily overwhelmed when trying to locate the "techniques" in music that often seem to slip through our fingers. Hadar's time model, through its singular focus on the dimension of time, acts as a net that catches Nordoff's techniques—in a way that makes them more distinct and accessible, even for those new to the approach. One of the strengths of Hadar's text is that, through the recordings, she *shows* the reader Nordoff's decision-making *process*—the specific musical action and interaction that led to further musical action and interaction—and in doing so, shows the reader something of the constitution of clinical musicianship. Rarely has an analysis of NR's work resulted in such a clear and systematic resource for training; this text will undoubtedly be valuable in the education and training of NR music therapists, as well as for the experienced NR professional. However, I believe the influence of this monograph can reach far beyond one approach. Any music therapist working within an

³All ten children were previously written about in Aigen (1998) and Nordoff and Robbins (2007).

improvisational approach would have much to learn from Hadar's analysis of musical interaction in time.

The musical excerpts are key to the effectiveness of Hadar's argument; at the same time, there is a lack of clarity regarding the way the reader is to listen to them. The reader is instructed to "listen carefully to the musical examples...before diving into the theory of each time phase" (p.22), but it is not always clear exactly which excerpts we are to listen to and what we are to be listening for. Some examples come with time markers which serve as helpful guides, but for others only a general description is given. It is somewhat puzzling that in a text on music and time, time is not consistently treated with more granularity in the musical analysis. While NR music therapists are trained to listen to musical interaction in a particular way, music therapists trained in other approaches (not to mention readers who are not music therapists) may need more guidance in understanding what to listen for. Perhaps this could have been addressed through a discussion of method, something the text does not include. The reader is given very little information on Hadar's method; we do not know how she listened to the sessions for the purposes of the study—how many times, in what order, and the methods of data analysis that were employed to produce her findings. A bit more clarity around her process with the recordings would help the reader hear them in all the particularity suggested by the analysis.

The Nordoff-Robbins monograph series provides a format for in-depth examination of different aspects of the approach and is, on one hand, a very appropriate place for this text. However, the monograph format does not give Hadar sufficient room to develop what is a highly original and potentially far-reaching thesis. The relationship between music and time is, after all, a large and perennial theme in a variety of music disciplines— aesthetics, music theory, music sociology, to name a few—and the reader would be served by a clearer positioning of the study (and NR's work) in the larger context of academic work on music and temporality. Coming to this text as a NR music therapist committed to music-centered perspectives, whose work finds much overlap with community music and music education, I heard echoes of the voices of these disciplines and the potential for richer engagement with them. Perhaps the monograph format cannot accommodate this broader discussion, yet one could argue that the topic, expansive as it is, requires this kind of treatment. The limited room for theoretical development offered by the monograph format also results in the use of theory at a broad and unnuanced level at certain points. The time model has substantial and exciting connections to the theories of Schutz, Stern, and Lakoff and Johnson, but Hadar maps her time model onto these theories a little too neatly at times. It would be interesting to see not only theoretical connections but also the points of tension: How does music complicate or complexify these theories? What new or unexpected knowledge about cognitive development does music provide? There is sufficient analysis and insight here to explore these theoretical relationships in a full-length book, something I would be eager to see in the future.

That said, Hadar has given us a fresh and exciting way to hear the music of music therapy and understand the togetherness that music can uniquely create. Though it is an exploration of a specific approach, this work could have broad implications for music therapy and other musical practices. Nordoff and Robbins were rooted in traditions of Western art music (something Hadar acknowledges), but temporality is a feature of all music, and Hadar's analysis could provide something of a model or inspiration for practitioners and researchers from other traditions. Musical time is approached very differently in Hindustani music, or electronic dance music (EDM), for example, and it would be interesting to see the time focus applied to other musics and music therapy approaches.

It has been said that music is the art of time. What is improvisation, after all, other than playing with time? Hadar has shown us how time can be shaped by music in skillful and

artful ways to generate new possibilities for growth, for wellbeing, and for our connection to others. In the Western world, where time is commodified and regarded as a resource to be exploited, our work as music therapists is shaped by the cultural expectation that we squeeze every bit of productivity and progress out of a delimited time frame. Hadar shows us that Nordoff and Robbins understood that there is no progress without presence, and that the presence that musical time offers is the one that can help bring about a different future.

About the Author

Erinn Epp PhD, MT-BC, MTA, directs choirs for incarcerated college students, adults with disabilities, and people living with aphasia; she also teaches music courses in a prison college program. Erinn completed her PhD at Nordoff Robbins/Goldsmiths College, where her research focused on the social dimensions of performance in Community Music Therapy.

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