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MUSICAL SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES  
THROUGH THE INDIGENOUS VOICE

(Re-storying [Crying in Music Therapy](#))

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## INTRODUCTION

As I praised the initiative to re-vision QIMT and appreciate the invitation to reflect on “Crying in music therapy” made by my fellow editors, I would certainly like to respond directly to one of their suggested questions: “What might you do differently if you wrote on the topic today?”

Beyond asserting ideals, if I wrote not only on the topic of “crying in music therapy” but in music therapy in general today I would inform readers on how Indigenous knowledges have served to contextualize (or simply perceive) profound spiritual perceptions or experiences of my patients when crying in sessions. When I incorporated Indigenous practices that involved music, clarity was enhanced as patients somehow diluted certain rigid conceptual beliefs. In my experience, Indigenous practices are fundamentally non-ideological by nature—neither God nor religiosity-oriented (these words do not exist in most of our indigenous lexicon).

In the experiential context of many Indigenous cultures of Venezuela, spiritual or existential practice is about bringing clarity, and this spiritual dimension is as central as music to the existential dimension. Music plays a potent role in terms of becoming more sensitive and aware of interrelated realities. Likewise, there is no division between the material and the spiritual as the “spiritual” dimension is embedded in the daily life of Indigenous Peoples of Venezuela simultaneously as it is integrated into the patterns of the cosmos. In other words (though words are always limited), spirituality is simply life. Indigenous leaders/elders often say that people who are not “spiritual” by experience may generate division as they can only understand by cutting things apart; they do not seem to be able to perceive clearly.

In any case, I would not have written about this, had it not been for the inviting question posed by my colleagues, Susan Hadley and Douglas Keith. In fact, as a Western-trained music therapist, I have not felt the need up until now to use my Indigenous voice to write, for example, about “illogical” experiences that have taken place in music therapy singularly in sessions where crying had been deeply involved. Nevertheless, when I use my Indigenous voice, I find it is fairly uncomplicated to talk about the “illogical” nature of many of the experiences that take place in music therapy sessions. I say “illogical” because they are not easily understandable or understood by “reason” and involve processes of enhanced perception that go beyond ego or psychological reality.

I find this opportunity favourable to share briefly about the conduciveness of Indigenous music practices to enhance perception beyond the psychological reality of patients and how I have incorporated these practices whenever relevant and needed.

In terms of experiential reality, Indigenous practices are fundamentally about experiencing, not about understanding in a logical way. Therefore, there is existence and there is you and me projecting our minds (psychological reality) into the world. GIM is perhaps the method that most closely addresses this “illogical” aspect, but where the experience must be translated in terms of logical words and meaning somehow. In addition, in music therapy, there is an “illogical” nature to improvisation, as I have discussed in *Artistic Music Therapy* (Albornoz, 2016).

Frankly, as this is the first time I am writing on the subject, I am not sure how to start and how to communicate it. Thus, instead of writing in a strict academic manner, I decided to use short reflections in chronicle style—simple, direct, and personal—to share and capture some details on the topic at hand.

With the present text, I am not trying to connect Indigenous approaches to conventional scientific thinking, hence the chronicle style may provide a better and simpler sense of what I am trying to share. Many “illogical” experiences have taken place throughout my years of practice but for this occasion I decided to portray only one vignette.

### Reflection 1

As a Western-trained music therapist returning to Venezuela, I realized the need to either adapt, change, complement, or even at times completely abandon the empirical-analytical aspect of the Western music therapy model I had learned in my training. This was necessary in order to render

the type of experiences patients were having when they did cry comprehensible. I knew then that it was necessary to perceive patients' spiritual or perceptual experiences as they happened without further rationalistic interpretation or theoretical frameworks on my side. Because I needed to report on patients during team meetings, I had to be bilingual in using the Western clinical lexicon and the language of the people I was working with.

*In part, Artistic Music Therapy (ArMT) emerged from this need as I re-viewed Indigenous practices. In my experience of sharing with the Ye'kuana community (the largest Indigenous community in Venezuela in the southeast region), they shared their understanding that there is individuality (psychological reality) given by nature and there is life and existence happening as a whole (existential reality), but everything is interconnected. I also learned that creativity is channelled in the spiritual dimension in which music is an essential energy.*

Due to the nature of these experiences, it became clear to me that principles of music therapy established by studying the people of European ancestry alone would not serve the majority of the population I was working with. After all, more than 5.97 billion of the world's population is non-European (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Therefore, figuring out how to meet the health needs of the world's diverse population is always significant as cultural adaptations and modifications can increase therapeutic effectiveness (Hwang, 2016) and a sense of humanity.

The majority of the Venezuelan population (me included) recognize themselves as "Morena" (Indigenous-African ancestry), and we represent more than 52% of the total population (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, República Bolivariana de Venezuela, 2011). Thus, Indigenous spiritual practices and their transmission knowingly or unknowingly remain at the core of our society despite Western Christian acculturation. Within this existential transmission line, spiritual experiences are commonly related to perceiving the multidimensional interactions of existential elements—not interpreting reality logically through fixed conceptualizations overly used by the intellect but perceiving the existential reality as it is ("Pacha" in Quechua). In this transmission, we simply know by direct experience that there are different interactional dimensions (not associated with religiosity or God). Some of these dimensions and experiences, for example, are related with receiving visions, sensing spiritual energies, connecting spontaneously with ancestors who were supportive or loved ones who passed away, and/or connecting with a higher perceptual intelligence within oneself that can make a difference in our life.

## Reflection 2: Invocation of the Healing Mother Presence

As a society, the majority of Venezuelans know that we have to "leave death well enough alone." This is not only something that Makiritaris in South Venezuela practice but also something we know through common experience—that although bodies pass away, the energy that connects us to a loved one can be felt in certain circumstances and not only as a result of a grieving process or a problematic bereavement hallucination. In our society, as in many others, this experience does not represent a mental health concern.

During my work as a music therapist, I have used a *talking circle* or *storytelling*, which is an Indigenous methodology still practiced among Kariñas in my grandmother's lineage. During one such session, Manuel, a 32-year-old with a history of substance abuse who was in recovery treatment, held the *ancestor's rock* and *told the story* of how his unmanageable drug addiction resulted in violence. He became a menace to himself and his mother, he said.

As Manuel reflected on his wrongdoings, he expressed feeling an intense longing for his mother, who had passed away but whom he had felt or perceived several times in his room at the residential treatment facility. He expressed a deep sense of regret and sadness for the pain he caused her. He was so sorrowful that he expressly asked me to create an experience through which he could communicate his feelings to his mother, whose death Manuel learned of a month after the fact, when he came out of several days of heavy drug use. He emphasised that when he had perceived his mother's presence during his time as a residential patient, he had not been using

drugs. It is known that patients with psychosis and substance abuse experience higher rates of hallucinations when using illicit drugs (Sokolski, Cummings, Abrams, DeMet, Katz, & Costa, 1994). It was highly unlikely, though, that these were substance-related hallucinations as Manuel did not have a psychotic profile.

To fulfil his need, which became the group's need as several members expressed having had a similar experience, a *drumming circle* was adopted.

*Drumming, singing or dancing circles are practices used by many Indigenous communities of Venezuela. These are in gatherings in which everyone sits in a circle to sing, dance, invoke and/or drum. It is a holistic practice of interconnectedness between participants and the cosmos. For example, with Manuel's group, I had used the Kaa'ulayawaa (dance-theater-game) to help participants to narrate aspects of their daily life such as different situations, relationships, struggles, and/or wellness experiences.*

Manuel sat in the middle of the circle, eyes closed. The guidance issued to the group was to maintain the beat in unison on the drums, to synchronize with each other in a calm state, and to foster an atmosphere of receptiveness. I perceived that this method was compatible with Manuel's need.

*For the Wayuu (Western region of Venezuela), the drum is the female aspect of every human being and the heartbeat of Mother Earth. The sound that emerges from the drumming is a vibration that accelerates the process of perceiving the existential reality as it is. This means that the vibration produced by drumming enhances our ability to perceive the nature of things as they are, not as we want them to be. Death is a reality and part of the process of life. When an Elder Indigenous person decides to leave this reality, there is a drumming practice used in preparation for their departure.*

Then, I lit a candle in front of him, as fire is a cleansing element. My grandmother used the fire element to clean the atmosphere against microbial activity, viruses, and/or damaging spirits. It was common for her to use it with us when we got sick.

The group was composed of 12 members, including Manuel. There were three females including me. The group's spontaneous acceptance of Manuel's spiritual need played a crucial role in this session. It might have been difficult, if not impossible, for this experience to take place otherwise.

Manuel appeared to become more sensitive to the power of the drumming resonance as the beating helped him to listen and also helped participants to connect to each other in the circle and the space. He remained still and silent for a while, completely relaxed and open to the experience. I played a small hand drum while the rest of the group played congas, Brazilian surdo, bongo, and djembe drums.

*When you drum in a contemplative state, you feel the resonance or the vibration of the drum in your entire body. When done in group setting, this experience is even more powerful. We know from the field of psychoacoustics that when there is vibration, there is energy. Indigenous music comes from this deeper understanding of the human system. The resonance or vibrations of drums is powerful, since it activates your life energy. Drumming is essentially about touching the power of life in one sense of higher levels of consciousness.*

At one point when we had synchronized pulse, tempo and our energies, Manuel felt that his mother was there (this is what Indigenous people call spirit or energy visits). Spontaneously, he started talking to his mother's presence. As a group, we fully respected the nature of Manuel's experience. The group was immersed in the experience.

Manuel needed to say “sorry,” as he asked her to save him from his bad decisions and degenerate forces and entities that had, in his words, “taken over his life.” Manuel kept talking softly in a poem-like way to his mother as the group continued playing the drums. Several other members of the group began to feel a deep sense of his mother’s energy and also started to weep softly with Manuel. We simply realized her presence, without conflict, without judgement. It was a very calm and refreshing energy. We were all there with Manuel and his mother’s energy. Some members had closed their eyes, while others looked at the drums, respecting Manuel’s intimate moment and in reverence to the experience. At one point, Manuel stopped talking. He remained silent, eyes closed for a while, to receive what he shared later was his mother’s serene message. This continued until the group drumming faded away spontaneously. “Drumming has ended, Manuel,” I said. “She touched my head,” Manuel replied. The group was neither surprised nor sceptical; members were simply present in the experience. Manuel attributed part of his clarity and successful recovery to this profound, long-lasting, perceptual experience. I did, too, as I also perceived his mother.

*This experience may differ from Western music therapy in that his spirituality came with a longing within him. He took the step to act on this by asking me to do something about it. I was able to do something due to my Indigenous heritage. This heritage comes with an openness to the so-called supernatural world. I know there are some other music therapists who are open to experiences like these. I encourage music therapists, Indigenous or not, to be open to these experiences in their practice if they feel comfortable and are genuine in their engagement.*

### Reflection 3

This next reflection emerges from my curiosity in exploring existing research studies on a topic that I thought had been ignored by Western science: Spiritual entities and the super/supernatural.

Kalish and Reynolds (1977) explored “supernatural” and mystical feelings in their research of death encounters. The purpose of their study was to learn and understand how and why groups differed in their views of death and bereavement. They asked participants if they had ever experienced the presence of someone after they had died. Nearly half of the 434 respondents from Los Angeles County responded affirmatively. One-fourth of respondents reported being awake when they experienced the presence. What I found particularly interesting was that responses were highly positive among African Americans (55%) and Mexican Americans (54%) when compared with Anglo-Americans (38%) and Japanese-Americans (29%). In my experience of working in the USA, these two former populations are more sensitive to deep perceptual experiences outside of bereavement.

In another study, Klugman (2006) explored the insights and experiences of twenty-one social workers on the topic of clients sensing the presence of loved ones who have died. Respondents shared that they grounded their interactions with such clients first and foremost by respecting the client’s dignity and experience. The author reported that 35.1% of respondents, that is, clients of the social workers, reported hearing voices of the deceased, 84% dreamed of the deceased, 37% saw a vision or image of the deceased, 55% felt the presence of the deceased, and 69% had conversations with the deceased, like in Manuel’s case.

When my sister passed away at 52 from a painful illness, I perceived her presence in a dream. In the dream she was desperately communicating her pain and fear of leaving the physical dimension. Her visit was unsettling at first, but once I calmed myself down, and with tears on my face, I lit a candle. Out of my love for her, I talked softly to her energy. I was living in Ohio at the time, so I spoke to one of my sisters by phone about this perceptual experience and asked her to please light a candle as well and talk to her energy. After this, I stopped perceiving her presence.

This is why for most Indigenous cultures cremation is common, especially for those who die at a young age, like my sister who was still embroiled in her body energy. At a young age, the dying process takes longer. For this reason, some

energy(s) will not just leave. Cremation (within an hour of being declared dead) is a common Indigenous practice to avoid disturbances to that life and their loved ones.

Many researchers interpret feelings of the presence of unseen others as an illusion coming from within a bereaved participants' own mind, which participants then interpret to be spiritual in origin (see Van Elk and Aleman, 2016). I wonder whether these researchers have ever had a moving spiritual experience like that? Often we question what we have not experienced. Unlike these researchers, Liester (1998) has posed the need to redefine hallucinations or experiences of this type, questioning whether the DSM-IV provides a useful definition on hallucination given that it does not take appropriate consideration of the cultural beliefs of the individual experiencing the hallucination.

As a Western-trained researcher, I can understand these intellectual assertions, but as an Indigenous descendant I have learned from my ancestors that we only know what we have experienced, and these “illogical” experiences take place as we open to the spiritual / existential reality. I learned through participation in Indigenous ceremonies in Venezuela (and Yoruba ceremonies in la Habana, Cuba, and Philadelphia, USA) that there are dimensions of life that cannot be understood by analysis or dissection. For example, in these spiritual ceremonies I have learned to just “dissolve” into the experience; something that our participants often experience in improvisational music therapy and/or GIM sessions. After all, many times music therapy experiences can be “illogical” and unbelievable by nature.

## Reflection 4

In most places I have worked, events in which people feel the energy or presence of another—or any other spiritual / existential experience that participants have shared—have tended to be discarded as signs of mental illness because they are viewed through a frame where the goal is to reduce “delusions” and reach a “reality orientation.” There is rarely an emphasis on understanding the nature of the experience. However, through experience and having an “embodied knowing” of how music can impact the innermost core of our participants, both physically and non-physically, my tendency (and the tendency of a few colleague friends) is not to ignore these experiences. Many participants have cried due to the impact of these experiences, which often involved a sudden sense of an energy or a presence, like in Manuel's case. For them, as many participants have told me, having the experience is all that matters. And, for me too, because I have had powerful perceptual experiences when I opened to my indigeneity.

When participants cry due to a profound perceptual experience related to an energy presence event (i.e., perceiving a loved one or an ancestral spirit), or any other existential force such as a sudden experiential alignment or “oneness” with nature, they need to sense that it is fine for them to openly share these vivid experiences during therapy sessions. This is especially the case for participants who are highly educated and try to intellectualize these experiences. Such participants can feel bewildered and sometimes disappointed by the vividness of these “illogical situations.” For example, after a particularly moving experience, one participant said, “It can't be my mother talking to me, she passed away. It can't be possible.” I have found that participants with standard education tend to be more practical than people with higher education in this regard; they simply loosen up to the power of these experiences.

## Reflection 5: Music Energy and Indigenous Practices.

The Meye'ruwa are wise men in the Amazonia who learned to manage life and nature through sounds, music, and chants. Music is used as a way to recreate life. They arrange sounds to structure music as an attempt to recreate creation, to transcend the psychological reality. They perceive creation as an intermingled amalgamation of sounds that reverberate into? existence. This musical spirituality is about perceiving the energy of multidimensional interactions between

existential elements and synchronizing with it. Music, including dance, plays a powerful role in enlarging this level of perceptual openness.

It is precisely this experiential dimension that made a profound difference in the lives of most of my participants. Through experiencing music, they were able to enhance their ability to perceive aspects of their life that they could not ordinarily. Through enhanced perception of the visible and invisible, the tangible and intangible are perceived. The participants' music experiences reverberated within themselves with such intensity and profoundness that spontaneous tears became part of their experiential process in many instances.

Participants have frequently shared that they came to music therapy because it made them feel more alive, more energized, and content (Albornoz & Gálvez, 2019). Their ability to perceive their lives (and life as a whole) is enhanced as they arrange their own music to recreate their own experience as beings. Many of my participants have discovered that only what they perceived and experientially knew, they knew. Music experiences provided just that.

*Some types of Warao chanting have no words and therefore are meaningless. Chanting is simply used to connect to life as life. Chanting is not supposed to have words. It is a way to relate to the tree, to water etc. There is no meaning behind the water. Warao just recognize it through chanting.*

In life-centered Indigenous methods, the practice of unity in diversity, reciprocity (social-cosmic), and complementarity has, for millennia, constituted the structure of their existence in close coexistence with the spiritual and the material. This practice is possible because perception is a dimension of intelligence that Indigenous people value and are attentive to. Music as energy plays a vital role in ceremonies to heighten perception.

*For example, the Doopooto (legitimate community authority) in my grandmother's Kariña lineage has inherited the practice of alertness, and the perceptual ability to conduct ceremonies precisely because he can manage his non-physical body and perceive the "largest things." Through this ability, the Doopooto can also perform healing ceremonies for his community. He uses herbs and songs to heal physiological-emotional imbalances. The songs he uses come from an understanding of the human system. They identify certain dimensions of the body that respond to the vibrations of these chants or songs. He arranges sounds in ways that the emerging song helps to activate the system of the imbalanced person. They use music as energy to synchronize with the existential vibration in such a way that the person can recover their balance. Music is an existential energy used to enhance perception, and to allow us to evolve wisely.*

## Postlude Reflexion: Indigenous-Based Practice

For the first time, through these short reflections, I wanted to communicate myself as a Kariña descendent to inform very briefly on my experience of integrating indigenous knowledge in my practice. I am not trying to justify how and why music therapy can account for Indigenous knowledge given that on several occasions I found myself not looking at patients as "natural objects" of study. There might be a concurrence of existing methods of music therapy and indigenous methodologies of knowing within the ambit of our practices. Truthfully, I do not "know." Nonetheless, Indigenous methods imply that it makes sense that art-making functions to bring and maintain life balance, which in practical terms means stability, clarity, and union in existing as a part of a whole.

Consecration, for instance, is a method used by Indigenous communities and one that I have incorporated during sessions by introducing drumming, singing, dancing, oral artistic forms, feasting, body ornamentation, weaving, and/or even cloth design. These artistic practices are understood by the original society of Abya Yala as ways to help maintain a conscious (non-compulsive) individual and collective existence within the community.

Incorporating Indigenous practices may require us to move away from identifying with rigid ideologies, theories, and/or belief systems that prevent us seeing Pacha (“what it is” in Quechua) in our therapeutic endeavours. For example, to refurbish a deteriorated school or help a participant on their path to death does not require our religious, political or theoretical identifications. It only requires an effort to get involved in the most creative and beneficial way. This is Pacha! Pacha tells you that there is no meaning behind a sunset. Meaning is just a psychological reality.

I have learned that incorporating valuable Indigenous methods carry beneficial possibilities at the dimensions of energy, body, mind (psychological/social), and/or spirituality (existential) within our practice(s). Indigenous methods can be easily integrated into music therapy, especially when the therapist adopts an artistic-based<sup>1</sup> practice as needed.

I grew up with an Indigenous grandmother who I loved deeply. Much of what I will share with you in this chapter, I learned directly from her. My initial contact with Indigenous ways of living began in 1981 when I more fully grasped my Indigenous heritage during a group visit to La Gran Sabana of Canaima (Spirits) National Park (the second largest eco-region in Venezuela). The visit allowed us to share with the Ye’kuana people. Hearing non-evangelized members increased my levels of sensitivity to and deeper understanding about their practices of being available to the life process in an inclusive way. This experience moved me profoundly.

For the Ye’kuana people, being inclusive means being spiritual /existential; if one is inclusive then nature and humanity are part of us without prejudice. As explained by some of them, we are part of everything because we are not excluded from the way creation expresses itself. I learned that this process of being spiritual requires seeking inner experiences (through methods such as contemplation retreats) that vibrate within you, nature, and existence as a whole. This trek had a profound impact on some of us as a group. It was a way of establishing what it means to be a human who is making minute contributions to our immense cosmos. Also, as we learnt, the Ye’kuana people’s Indigenous vision is not limited to anthropocentrism.

In practice, Indigenous arts-based<sup>2</sup> music therapy methods can help individuals to move beyond their survival needs to subtler and broader possibilities of existence. By carrying out some Indigenous methods in individual, group, and social settings, it is easy to envision the potential of music therapy to become a movement of professionals, striving for awareness and stability in the world. That means stretching out beyond goal-oriented practices which focus on outcomes to more life-oriented ones which prioritize the process of life in all its subtleness. This is something that I have learned in my yoga practice as well.

Music therapy has a clinical agenda, but it could also have an agenda for the individual subject and society as a whole in terms of developing humanity through the evolution of consciousness. Thus, looking at music therapy as a movement implies that our energy could become a sensitive force which contributes to delivering possibilities for world balance, an endeavour which in itself necessitates the monitoring of our own inner balance.

As I review these reflections, I notice they are devoted to the exaltation of the legacy of Indigenous ancestry in some domains. I also notice their implications not only for music therapy but for the world at large. Indigenous knowledge all over the world has been built in its natural environment. In the case of South America, its validity dates from the beginning of human life in Abya Yala (American continent) and has responded to real life needs without threatening Pachamama balance or prioritizing human beings situated at the center and above everything else.

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<sup>1</sup> By artistic-based therapist, I mean the therapist as an artist.

<sup>2</sup> By arts-based I mean the inclusion of all of the arts modalities.



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