

# Tales from the **MUSIC THERAPY ROOM**



# THE NOTEBOOK

— Claire Molyneux —

Five years old. Normal birth and delivery. Quiet, placid baby. Preschool teacher first to raise concern: autism, developmental delay. First-born. No siblings to make a comparison. At 18 months, no language, did not respond to name. Little eye contact. Very active, climbing, no sense of danger. Loves music. Always responds to familiar songs. As a baby would rock and bounce in time. Gets upset when music is played or when parents sing particular songs. Attends preschool. Doesn't play with other children.

'My boy', she told me, 'has no words.' But his communication ran much deeper than words. His gaze, albeit infrequent, was filled with intent.

'My boy', she told me, 'plays alone at kindy, he doesn't mix with the other children...but he watches them.'

The boy lies on the floor of the therapy room. His back is against the wall in a space he has chosen that is just big enough for his body but not his legs which stretch out into the room. Above him there is a window and where he lies is a heating vent. Fascinated by the vent, he closes his eyes to feel the warm air on his face and hair. His mother sits close, but not too close. He would have to move to touch her. I watch him for several minutes, waiting to see if he is interested in my presence. The space and time feel quietly peaceful, without expectation, just trying out different ways of being in each other's presence. The boy's mother is accepting of this and watches too, smiling at me occasionally. I move a drum closer and tap tentatively, testing the sound created in the space between us. The sound is quiet but enough to break his reverie and I wonder if I have interrupted

too soon. He looks at me briefly before returning to focus on the warm air. I sound the drum again with my fingertips, a trickle of taps, then pause and wait...another trickle, pause and wait. The boy moves his hand on the carpet. I feel a spark of excitement and remind myself to hold the space and quiet that exists between us. I move my hand on the drum, pause and wait. He moves his fingers on the carpet and darts a look at me with his dark eyes. An invitation? I move my hand over the drum skin again and he does the same on the floor. I tap the drum and as I lift my fingers off, I hold my hand palm up, waiting. The boy taps the floor with his fingertips – a definite movement this time followed by another glance at me. I slowly ease myself into the space we have created, moving a little closer and sustaining the fragile connection that is emerging.

‘My boy’, she told me, ‘doesn’t show interest in other people, he doesn’t respond to his name.’

The sounds we create, mine resonant and full on the drum, his muffled on the carpet, grow to fill the space. His posture shifts as he lifts himself up on one elbow to get a better look at me and the drum. Over the next seven minutes, the boy moves closer to me, touches the drum, holds my gaze.

‘He’s never done that with someone he’s just met’, she said. ‘Usually he just ignores other people and carries on with his own thing.’

She tells me of the strategies they have put in place at preschool to support his play with others. She tells me of the routine they follow at home to help him learn basic tasks, the way she urges him to find ways to connect within the rote learning that he is capable. This boy can put puzzle pieces in the correct places, he can sort shapes, he has clear musical preferences. Yet his autism prevents him from engaging in these activities with others.

In the session, I tell him that we’ve finished with the drum and that I’m going to get the guitar. My chest tightens as I reach for the guitar; is the connection we created with the drum strong enough to sustain a change like this? The boy

moves back a fraction, pressing his body against the wall. I wonder if my movements are too fast and I remind myself to breathe and move slowly. I nestle the guitar on my lap. I glance at the boy, then at the guitar. I don't notice my eyebrows rising until his do too. With my fingertips, I tap the body of the guitar, round the edge, brushing over the strings, making them vibrate inaudibly. I watch my hand as it moves. Stopping, I hold it palm out and glance at the boy, barely lifting my head. He moves his hand on the carpet. Off I go again, tapping the guitar body, teasing out rhythms, increasing in speed and intensity, then stop. This time, the boy moves his hand before I even have a chance to look up. Closer this time, sending my fingers dancing on the guitar, brushing across the strings as I gain confidence that these new sounds are going to be okay in the space between us. My chest relaxes and I feel a smile. This time his hand is there just before I stop playing, hovering in the air between us. He pushes my hand back and I feel a rush of excitement as my fingers touch the strings and away I go again, playing louder this time. The physical contact between us grows stronger and surer with each pause and return, the boy pushing my hand back to the strings to sustain the music. I am suddenly aware of his mother, watching lovingly, smiling as her boy communicates his intentions, his hand dancing in the musical space we have created. On the next turn, I pause longer and hold my hand out. As he puts his fingers in mine, I bring his hand to the strings. Too much? I glance at his mother. Her eyes fill with tears. A moment of unexpected communication, unexpected connection. Suddenly overwhelmed the boy looks to his mother for comfort. She offers her lap and from here he is able to hold my gaze, touching my hand when I pause, returning it to the guitar in an effort to sustain the music. He puts his hand in mine again and allows me to bring his fingers to the guitar, his touch strong enough to sound the strings this time. He leaves his hand there.

Relaxed he glances at Mum and back to the guitar. It is time for us to finish. He has given as much as he can for

today, invited me in just far enough. The three of us rest in the knowledge that this rare connection heralds more possibilities. There is hope as he sits back on Mum's lap, his body folding in on itself, tired from the exertion of simply being with, but watching as I replace the guitar and fetch my notebook from the top of the piano.