

# **An aesthetic view on interaction between a musician and congenital deafblind children and children with multiple disabilities**

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The background of this presentation is a project about establishing joint experiences through improvisation. The project made as action research has been made possible through collaboration between two resource centres: The resource centre for children and youth with multiple impairments (with the Danish acronym VIKOM) and the Resource centre on congenital deafblindness (with the Danish acronym VCDBF). Vocalist and musician Cathrine Lervig and professor emeritus Birgit Kirkebæk have been in charge of the project. In addition, three children with multiple disabilities and three children with congenital deafblindness have participated. The children have each had ten lessons with Cathrine Lervig where they communicated through sound and movement. She has also given a number of concerts for the remaining children on the two participating schools. As a musician who works through improvisation, Cathrine Lervig approaches the children by tuning in to their existing expressions, and the communication takes place through sound and movement. This approach differs from what you find in music therapy and music educational theory and practice. Reciprocal affective tuning to the universe of the other person takes place together with anticipation of what the other person is about to express and with joint creation of an expression here and now that involves both parts equally. The project was concluded late summer 2005.

The point of the project is that an aesthetic perspective based on Colwyn Trevarthen's and other researchers' recognition of the connection between music and communication may help many of the children with severe impairments who are today treated with strategies inspired by behaviourism – or whom we treat with a basis in strategies which are exclusively directed towards cognition. The argument for the reasoning chosen is that an aesthetic approach includes emotional aspects and combine emotion and cognition. This, however, requires that all expressions are noticed and taken seriously. My presentation is based on a case study on a young man, Jon, 16 years old. He is blind, but has residual hearing. Based on the interaction between this young man and the musician (used as an example) it is discussed, which changes an aesthetic paradigm, requires in psychology and in educational theory and practice. What professional standpoints must be abandoned if a relationistic

perspective is to be taken seriously?

## **Music is communication**

Cathrine Lervig seeks through wordless singing and musical improvisation to establish a common dialogic room of sounds, rhythm and movements based on the expressions of each individual child. This is a kind of singing, inspired by Saami jojk and African Ngoma. Ngoma is a total sentient concept, which holds the expansion of the moment in rhythm, movement, singing etc (Bjørkvold 1992). The purpose of the project is to find new special pedagogy insight in which basic factors that are involved when it comes to establishment of contact, co-action and communication in regard to children who are in a vulnerable situation due to the uncertainty that their functional impairments cause with the surrounding and their difficulties in interacting with the surroundings in an immediate understandable way.

The basic hypotheses of the project are as follow:

- Music and communication are two sides of the same coin.
- Increased awareness of the fact that the elements of the music may enrich the communication.
- The relation is balanced in a state on mutual sincerity through musical improvisation.

Follow-on hypotheses which are important the issue of the project have been advanced on the basis Cathrine Lervig's music theoretical insight and supported by a line of theories (Trevarthen 2000, Bjørkvold 1992, Bråten 1998 and 2000, Lorentzen 2001 and 2003, Sollied and Kirkebæk 2001 and others).

- Instead of looking at the child and the situation from without and in advance contemplate how we wish the child to react, we must *be* in the situation, experience it with the child and hereby *make* it important through inclusion of the rhythm of the body, the sound of the voice, the dance of movement.
- We must not only accept, but also *appreciate* different sounds, movements and rituals to a degree that we include them and use them as a starting point in the communication.

## **“The lived body” and a musical/aesthetic access to communication**

”The lived body” is an expression applied by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It means that ”the body is an expression, which cannot be separated from what it expresses”. Meaning and participation are main concepts when we speak on the basis of an aesthetic paradigm. Merleau-

Ponty's "perception of the lived body as our original and meaningful way of accessing the world" may also contribute to the understanding of what happens in the sequences of interaction which develop between Cathrine Lervig and Jon when they improvise. They create a space – a lived space. "The lived space," in Merleau-Ponty's sense of the expression, comprehends the physical, the bodily, the psycho-social and the musical space.

Merleau-Ponty's point is that "we are bodily present in any perception", and hence it is not possible to take a distance from this even though the world seems different for those directly involved and those in the audience. Merleau-Ponty highlights the body as an experiencing subject – in other words as a silent witness. "The silent witness", which Merleau-Ponty speaks about is the lived body, which means not only the experienced body, but the present, social and meaning making body, as opposed to the purely biological body. The most fundamental condition for perception is our body, or, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it: Our body is not in the time, it inhabits space and time. So basically we are our body, but the body may also perceive itself, which is a prerequisite for the instrumental idea that we have a body", as the Danish researcher of music theory Svend Holgersen writes.

Merleau-Ponty describes the meaning making relation between the child and its environment as intentional. He has a particular category for movement, which he calls locomotive intention. Intention has something to do with meaning making through interaction. For Merleau-Ponty the body is the original unit for meaning making. The world is not in itself meaningful, but "it is meaningful to us due to our bodily existence and access to the world." Merleau-Ponty thinks that we see things in their entity and not only in their actually featured part. The lived body, for him, is doomed to make meaning – in other words, it just cannot at all waive it.

When Cathrine Lervig and I myself have a focus of the innate rhythmic pulsation, of non-verbal communication and the child's effort to create meaningful coherence and flow, an aesthetic paradigm is its basis. A major point of this aesthetic is that the product is completed by the co-operation of the Other – in other words that nothing is fulfilled before it is seen and interpreted by an Other.

### **An outside perspective on Cathrine's interaction with Jon**

When one analyses the video recorded interaction between Cathrine and Jon on this background, a lot of questions emerge. What do the constantly occurring head movements which Jon makes mean to him? Which experiences do they give him, and which emotional expressions may we find in his behaviour - and in that of Cathrine? What happens between them? And how does the artist encounter the individual, with whom she is going to meet for the first time? The encounter had the following development (described in further details in the Danish book "No sound is wrong").

Jon sits in a wheelchair opposite Cathrine. He moves his head from side to side. Cathrine and Jon start by holding hands. Jon then lets go of Cathrine's hand and makes sign of taking off his shirt. Cathrine tries to join him by singing, in the rhythm of Jon's head movements. Here there is a break. Jon gets a grip of his own hand and briefly stops moving his head. He produces deep sounds, as well as a kind of spitting sounds.

Cathrine imitates Jon's small sounds. She continues with non-sense talk and sings again. Jon now dances with his fingers. He seems to obey to his own basic rhythm. Cathrine seems seeking and a bit insecure. Jon turns his head rhythmically and "dances" with his hands/fingers and produces small sounds. Cathrine awaits Jon's initiatives and tries to answer his sound productions, and she answers these and tries to take Jon's hand. Jon withdraws his hand, and Jon's teacher suggests that Cathrine touches Jon's arms and shoulders in stead. Cathrine follows up on this, and Jon accepts this way of touching. Cathrine sings in the same rhythm as Jon moves his head. She adds something new to his movements; the sound of her voice. There is a break. Jon seems to be listening attentively. Cathrine lays her hands on his shoulders. Jon explores her hands briefly and then puts his fingers in his hands for a short while. Jon swings his head intensively and murmurs. Cathrine follows up with a very wavering voice or vibrato. Jon is indeed attentive – he is very participating and very listening. There is a close head-to-head contact. Vibrato in a low pitch in accordance with Jon's proper sounds. There is harmony and shared experience through vibrating sounds. Pause and consideration. Jon sits totally quiet without swinging his head. Cathrine starts to sing in a higher pitch tone, but still has the deep, "raw" sounds as her basic rhythm – the same rhythm as Jon's head movements. Jon straightens up, strokes his forehead and again swings his head from side to side. Cathrine's hand is on his shoulder. Now Jon begins to explore her hands, at first with his left and then with his right hand. He briefly holds her hand with his right hand. Cathrine then approaches him with deep, strong and vibrating sounds. Jon listens again. Cathrine's initiative is dramatic. Jon still holds Cathrine's hand. Again he lifts up his shirt - several times. What does this mean? Jon puts his fingers in his mouth, listens, his face towards Cathrine and again swings his head. Cathrine puts her hand against his shoulder. There is an exchange of murmuring sounds. Jon has his fingers in his mouth. Harmonised murmuring sounds head by head. Jon yawns. "Do you have enough of this now?" Cathrine asks. Jon reaches his hand towards her. Again their heads are touching. Jon lets his head fall down on Cathrine's arm. For a long time they sit like this. Jon stretches out like after a good sleep. Thank you for the class!"

The things which caught my attention were partly the fact that Jon tries to take off his shirt and partly the effect Cathrine's vibrato has on him. Finally I was very absorbed by Jon's use of his hand movements, they seemed to be used very intentionally. However, what struck me most was how Jon being deafblind confirms and reconfirms his communication with Cathrine. In the beginning Jon is in his own basic rhythm. As Cathrine adds a "leading part" to this basic rhythm with her voice, Jon becomes attentive and participating. It supports him that she touches his shoulder, but as he uses his hands and fingers partly for dancing and partly for exploring Cathrine, he does not want her to hold on to his hands. As I see it, the dance of the hands is a way of sharing the experience with Cathrine. When she confirms him by adding something new (the sound of her voice) to his basic rhythm (his head movements), he then re-confirms her by adding the dance of his hands. Together they explore the "head-by-head" effect of the vibrations. They share the experience. Perhaps the attempts to take off his shirt are a way of expressing enthusiasm – an excitement – which may be compared to the reaction in a soccer player when he scores a goal. But it may also be considered as a re-confirmation of the dramatic expression with which Cathrine confirmed that at Jon independently explores her hands and wants to know who she is. If she is hot tempered and "dramatic", he will, by tearing off his shirt, manifest that he, too, is hot tempered and "dramatic".

The episode described and our interpretation of it is indeed what the Norwegian psychologist understands as an aesthetic paradigm. It has to do with moments of aesthesia, such as the Norwegian professor of musicology Jon-Roar Bjørkvold describes it. When Cathrine adds something new to Jon's expression, and when he responds to it and considers her suggestion, they co-create a new aesthetic expression, which contains something from them both.

What Jon uses in his communication are the head movements from side to side and his vocalisations: In my "from the outside" observations Jon's sounds and the use of the hands a major role, just as his unreserved acceptance of Cathrine must be highlighted as something special. But also the head movements, I think, are something much more than stereotypes and introvert activity.

The head movements have very different meaning and are used for different purposes: They set a rhythm of rest which has a sleep inducing character, he is relaxed and on his way to sleep. They are used as a personal flow, which make his world coherent. They are used as a rhythmical instrument, which sets both the rhythm and the tenderness or ferocity in the expression of the piece of music. They also set the pace and dynamics and are parts of the shared flow, which he co-creates with Cathrine. They are used to provide the particular sensory experience which it gives when you move the head from side to side according to a sound source with different rhythms – it is a kind of amplification of which he himself is in control.

When his head movements stop, he signalises: I am responsive to the new things you will bring to me.

His hands also seem to be used for several different purposes:

- Jon calls on, accepts or rejects Cathrine's hands and thus signalises both limits and an accommodating attitude.
- Jon explores Cathrine's hands and finds out how she is.
- Jon uses his hands and fingers as an instrument and plays on Cathrine's hands as if they were the keys of a piano.
- Jon uses his hands to communicate frustration: He presses his finger into Cathrine's hand, and he hits himself. He also protects himself or prevents himself from doing things by sitting on his hands.
- Jon uses his hands to pull up his shirt and thereby signalises receptiveness – or he uses them to feel his stomach and signalise "this is me" – or to pull up his shirt and bite it, perhaps as a sign of insecurity or need for a break?

Jon's vocalisations are varied and manifold. If I close my eyes and listen to the sound track of the video recording, the pattern which Jon and Cathrine create together seems very melodic. They tune in to each other and harmonise their sounds. With the eyes open the sounds must be perceived together with the movements in Jon's head and hands underlining the emotional value of the interaction in general. Jon wishes to communicate in a musical way with Cathrine, but he also decides for how long and how he wants to participate.

The example illustrates many of the points of this presentation. In regard to special pedagogy efforts the new infant paradigm of the teaching of children with functional impairments meant a revolution in regard to taking the starting point in the relation and the early contact patterns. However, the question is, have we spend enough time and energy on understanding the musical qualities from where the mother-child contact arises? If it is a matter of *creating* significance and *through improvisation* open up for each other's perception of the world, this is not only a new infant paradigm coming up but also an aesthetical paradigm characterised by the fact that the expressions of the Other are taken so seriously that improvisation and musical elements are given space not only in the establishment of contact but also as important parts of further development of contact and communication.

### **Litterature:**

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