

The Music of Matrescence: The Missing Link in our understanding of Mother-Infant Bonding through Interactive Music. A Commentary on Vazquez-Diaz de Leon (2024)

ELIZABETH MCLEAN [1]

*Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne
'Vital Voices' Private Practice, Geelong, Australia*

ABSTRACT: Vazquez-Diaz de Leon's (2024) study explores mothers' uses of music in everyday life, illuminating the potential of this reciprocal process in supporting the quality of mother-infant interactions and maternal bonding, while also supporting maternal identity, regulation and coping during motherhood. This commentary calls for further matricentric focused research that acknowledges the social and cultural context of 'matrescence' as a significant and transformation shift into motherhood that is largely underrepresented and warrants further exploration and discourse into how this period may intersect with mothers' musical engagement in everyday life.

Submitted 2024 May 23; accepted 2024 May 31.

Published 2024 October 7; <https://doi.org/10.18061/emr.v19i1.10051>

KEYWORDS: *Matrescence, motherhood, communicative musicality*

THE powerful interactive potential of shared musicking to support early parent-infant bonding is a well-documented arena of research that offers a solid theoretical base underpinning the work of many multidisciplinary professionals, across various fields. Vazquez-Diaz de Leon's mixed methods study exploring mothers' uses of music listening and singing with their baby during everyday life as a new mother and its relationship with facilitating maternal-infant bonding and attachment contributes an important perspective to this well documented discourse. It supports the strong evidence-base of the highly reciprocal, intrinsically co-regulatory and socially bound nature of musical engagement between mother and infant (Malloch and Trevarthen, 2009; Papousek, 1996), shedding further light on the ways in which music listening and singing can support maternal self-identity, regulation of mood and coping, which also serves as a key influence impacting the quality of mother-infant bonding. This paper offers us some early matricentric insights into the influence of motherhood as a social and cultural context on a mother's use of and engagement with music.

As Winnicott's (1960) seminal theory of the parent-infant relationship states, "there is no such thing as a baby" but a mother and infant connected. This historically prevailing theory of mutuality for mother and baby to flourish in their relationship together continues to underpin contemporary attachment theory and research within the infant mental health field today. It also offers a robust theoretical framework for the significant role of attuned musical engagement and interaction to support early development across infancy and beyond, that identifies the primary caregiver as integral to optimal infant outcomes (Poćwierz-Marciniak & Harciarek, 2021) Yet, this evidence base remains predominately infant-centric and we are still missing key understandings of the maternal experience to best support both the infant and mother as individuals, and as a dyad.

THE COMPLEX INTERSECTION OF MUSIC AND MATRESCENCE

As Vazquez-Diaz de Leon's study begins to identify, despite our growing knowledge of the functions of music as inextricably linked with our social and cultural contexts (DeNora, 2012), there is an obvious lack of scholarship exploring the social and cultural context of motherhood itself and music's function within this. The term *matrescence*, to describe the life altering transformation of becoming a mother, was first coined by anthropologist Dana Raphael (1975) nearly fifty years ago, and while it has been further elaborated on over



the last few decades, there is still an obvious underrepresentation of research and inquiry into this significant life transition for mothers. While more recent neurocognitive scholarship is articulating and investigating the rapid and extreme hormonal and environmental changes of pregnancy that mark the transition to motherhood as a major biosocial life event and sensitive neurocognitive developmental period (Orchard et al., 2023, p. 313), this research is yet to consistently partner with attachment scholarship.

Like the new mothers included in Vazquez-Diaz de Leon's research, the context and experience of becoming a mother warrants further curiosity and close investigation, as we attempt to better understand and value how this period of matrescence may impact and interact with a mother's lived experiences, including their uses of, and experience of music. There has been a seminal publication on music and mothering that combines contributions from a variety of scholars and artists that discuss the multiple and profound relationships that exist between music and mothering (Rose, Ross & Hartmann, 2017). This text offers a powerful early cry for music and motherhood to be appropriately positioned in the academic sphere as an area of human experience demanding attention and resources. Moreover, the research of Savage (2017; 2019) in an Australian context, sheds necessary light on the complexity of musical appropriation in and across motherhood. Her research illuminates the contradictions of early musical engagement as both a reinforcer of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996) practices at times and, a process of strengthening family ties and social connectedness, belonging and emotional well-being.

Savage's findings compliment Vazquez-Diaz de Leon's results that revealed the complexity of the mothering experience and uses of music also. While mothers found their use of self-selected musical engagement and singing as a way to regulate their mood, cope with challenging aspects of mothering and support feelings of connection with their baby, conversely, the 'motherhood experience' was consistently described as having positive and negative associations. This speaks to an often under-represented, yet very common lived experience of *maternal ambivalence* for mothers. Lowy (2020) defines this as a powerful and dynamic encounter of both feelings of hatred and love that characterise the maternal experience, shaped by the social, political and cultural institution of motherhood. The existence of both negative and positive emotions in mothers across many facets of mothering, including when using music, needs to be normalized and respected as an expectant experience of mothering within our society. This demands further investigation.

GROUNDING COMMUNICATIVE MUSICALITY IN CULTURE AND CONTEXT

Vazquez-Diaz de Leon's research findings draw heavily on the seminal theory of 'communicative musicality' by Malloch and Trevarthen (2009) that underpins much existing music therapy practice and research with infants and parents (Haslbeck, 2014; Malloch et al., 2012). These reciprocal and subtle musical moments of shared intimacy that shape early mother-infant interactions provide us with a strong framework for beginning to understand the powerful function of music to support mother-infant bonding. Yet, there remains gaps in our knowledge of the context and culture of individual influences that shape a mother's relationship with and engagement in music when applying this theory to practice. The complexity of music as a social and intimate process shared between humans demands the exploration of individual circumstances and cultural values, attitudes and beliefs if we are to more deeply understand how we can best foster intimacy and well-being through music (McLean, 2016).

This study of mothers' everyday uses of music with their baby excluded any explicit data gathering of a mother's musical history, culture of music in their family, musical backgrounds or musical sense of self. These cultural and contextual demographics are highly relevant when examining the interactional process of music as a socially and emotionally bound construct for mother and infant. Moreover, our understanding of musical identities as defined as performative, constantly evolving and negotiated across a range of social contexts is very relevant here (Hargreaves et al., 2016). Especially within the context of becoming a new mother and navigating a whole new identity and sense of self. For example, how has a mother's negative experience of singing in a school choir impacted her ability to engage in using her voice to sing to her new baby? How does a mother raised in a musically rich home environment now connect with music listening and singing for herself as a new mother? How does a neurodivergent mother dealing with sensory overload use music listening in her early mothering experience? These are all just some questions that call for further inquiry to explore the many complex and nuanced influences and variables that shape this intersection of music and motherhood.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this commentary in response to Vazquez-Diaz de Leon's research calls for further matricentric focused research that acknowledges the social and cultural context of matrescence as a significant and transformational shift into motherhood. Currently this life stage is largely underrepresented and warrants further exploration and discourse into how this period may intersect with mothers' musical engagement in everyday life. Only through this acknowledgment of motherhood as a sensitive, highly tumultuous neurodevelopmental period for the new and seasoned mother, may we then best support optimal outcomes for both the infant and the mother through the powerful process of music.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was copyedited by Nicola Dibben and layout edited by Jonathan Tang.

NOTES

[1] Correspondence can be addressed to: Dr Elizabeth McLean, Faculty of Fine Arts and Music, The University of Melbourne, Australia E-mail: mcleanmusictherapy@gmail.com

REFERENCES

- Choi, P., Henshaw, C., Baker, S., & Tree, J. (2005). Supermum, super wife, supereverything: Performing femininity in the transition to motherhood. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 23(2), 167–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02646830500129487>
- DeNora, T. (2000). *Music in everyday life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489433>
- Hargreaves, D. J., MacDonald, R. & Miell, D. (2016) Musical Identities. In S. Hallam, I. Cross & M.H. Thaut (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of music psychology*, 2nd edn (2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2 Oct. 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198722946.013.45> , accessed 23 May 2024.
- Haslbeck, F. B. (2014). The interactive potential of creative music therapy with premature infants and their parents: A qualitative analysis. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 23(1), 36–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08098131.2013.790918>
- Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven: Yale.
- Lowy, M. (2020). *The maternal experience: Encounters with ambivalence and love*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003124344>
- Malloch, S., Shoemark, H., Črnčec, R., Newnham, C., Paul, C., Prior, M., . . . Burnham, D. (2012). Music therapy with hospitalized infants-the art and science of communicative musicality. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 33(4), 386–399. <https://doi.org/10.1002/imhj.21346>
- Malloch, S., & Trevarthen, C. (2009). Musicality: Communicating the vitality and interests of life. In S. Malloch & C. Trevarthen (Eds.), *Communicative musicality: Exploring the basis of human companionship* (pp. 1–11). Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198566281.003.0001>
- McLean, E. (2016). Fostering intimacy through musical beginnings: Exploring the application of communicative musicality through the musical experience of parents in a neonatal intensive care unit. *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, 16(2). <https://doi.org/10.15845/voices.v16i2.874>

Orchard, E. R., Rutherford, H. J. V., Holmes, A. J., & Jamadar, S. D. (2023). Matrescence: lifetime impact of motherhood on cognition and the brain. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 27(3), 302–316. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2022.12.002>

Papousek, H. (1996). *Musicality in infancy research: biological and cultural origins of early musicality*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198523321.003.0002>

Poćwierz-Marciniak, I., & Harciarek, M. (2021). The effect of musical stimulation and mother's voice on the early development of musical abilities: A neuropsychological perspective. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(16), 8467. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18168467>

Raphael, D. (1975). Matrescence, becoming a mother, a “new/old” rite de passage. In D. Raphael (Ed.), *Being female: Reproduction, power, and change* (pp. 65-72). Berlin, New York: De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110813128.65>

Rose, M. J., Ross, L., & Hartmann, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Music of motherhood: History, healing, and activism*. Demeter Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zgb07s>

Savage, S. & Hall, C. (2017). Thinking about and beyond the cultural contradictions of motherhood through musical mothering. In M. J. Rose, L. Ross & J. Hartman (Eds.), *Music of motherhood: History, healing, and activism* (pp. 32–50). Bradford: Demeter Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zgb07s.7>

Savage, S. (2019). Exploring the intergenerational responsibility of musical mothering and morality. *International Journal of Community Music*, 12(1), 111–128. https://doi.org/10.1386/ijcm.12.1.111_1

Winnicott, D. W. (1960). Ego distortion in terms of true and false self. In *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development*. The International Psycho-Analytical Library, 64:1-276. London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1965.