THE DYNAMICS OF MUSIC THERAPY

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Music therapy is a new field of therapeutic endeavor. It was
natural for students and practitioners to concern themselves first
with methods and their results. Within a very few years the
methods of using music for therapeutic purposes have been
rather well established, and their beneficial effects have been
proven. It is then understandable that the interest shifted to the
dynamics involved. This switch of interest from the practical to
the theoretical side of music therapy became obvious at this
Annual Conference. A great deal of research is underway to
examine the factors which are responsible for the observable
effects of music on various kinds of disturbed persons. No over-
all theory has evolved so far. It is the purpose of this presenta-
tion to suggest perspectives for further exploration.

The therapeutic effect of music can probably be explained
by first, the effect that music has on emotions in general, i.e., on
the individual, and second, its effect on interpersonal relation-
ships.

We possess considerable information about the physiological
and emotional changes produced by music. However, talk about
a mysterious “X factor” still persists.* There seems to be some-
thing magic in the effects of music, or at least the materialistic
analysis of physiological responses to music seems to be unsatis-
factory to many as an explanation of its deep emotional appeal.
This vague dissatisfaction with, and suspicion of, many forms of
analysis seem to have some justification. However, they will not
be allayed by involved psychological “explanations”; what is lack-
ing in many research studies is an holistic approach to an under-
standing of the effect of music.

A variety of theories have been advanced to explain the emo-
tional effects of music. Naturally, only a few characteristic ex-
amples from the abundant literature can be mentioned here. Mu-

*Is this perhaps a relapse into the ancient concept expressed by the Roman
Boetius who assumed in his Musica Mundana a mystical connection be-
tween music and the cosmos?
it produces a kind of electricity to which animals, feebleminded, and idiots are sensitive; it causes a special kind of vibration; the tempo arouses certain emotions in the listener. Heinlein studied the effects created by major and minor chords, by tempo, pitch, rhythm, harmony, and melody. According to Bender music reaches subcortical centers of the brain not affected by other activities, and, thereby, helps to integrate the personality that is going to pieces in children. Music can arouse by way of the thalamus, the relay of all emotions, sensations, and feelings. Gilman and Pappert examine the properties of music, its ability to attract attention, to produce various moods, to stimulate associations and imagery, to relieve internal tension, and to facilitate self-expression. Capurso made a special study of the moods created by certain musical pieces; the Cellar project established a relation between musical preference and the listener’s personality, attempting a personality diagnosis through the preference factor.

Besides these more or less physiological oriented forms of analysis, we find psychological explorations, mostly provided by psychoanalysts, based on theoretical assumptions of questionable scientific validity. Montani explains the “mysterious feeling of a sadness developed by the Minor Mode” as feelings which are associated in the unconscious with self-punishment or masochistic demands arising from the basic castration complex. Tilly divides music composers into a masculine group and a group possessing “neurotic feminine qualities.” Individuals respond most favorably to music (and hence to the composer) in which the degree of latent homosexuality approximates more closely than that of the listener. A man in whom the “Masculine Principle” is weak would prefer music which is strongly feminine in character. Pfeiffer claimed that music provides a method of escaping reality through its basic rhythm. Music is “pure libido symbolism,” lacking objectification. Kohut and Levarie develop a theory regarding the enjoyment of the listener to music. Music eliminates the primitive fear of unorganized sound; the musical sequence from dissonance to consonance serves as playful repetition and playful solution of a basically threatening situation.

The distorted psychoanalytic concepts of the effects of music were demonstrated to me by a friend, a co-resident in psychiatry in Vienna. After he began analytic didactic analysis he stopped playing the violin; he had found out that it was merely a form of masturbation.

All the before-mentioned attempts to analyze the effects of music on the individual proceed apparently from the assumption that musical experience is highly individualized, that an individual is affected by a force outside of himself, in this case, by music. Such concepts seem to neglect the basic character of music. Music is not a force, it is not anything per se, it does not even exist except through its sound—and sound is not a force either. Music takes place between people; it is communication, it is language. To examine the effects of tempo, harmony, melody, and other elements of music would be comparable to an examination of language in regard to the effects of consonants, vowels, the speed of speech, its pitch, etc. Some significant correlation may well be established between the various properties of speech and the response of the individual. But all these correlations remain insignificant as long as they are not integrated in an analysis of the meaning of speech. The reaction to speech is obviously basically determined by the meaning which the listener gleams from what he hears. The same is true for music. The detailed study of isolated properties neglects an exploration of the total impact of music on the listener.

To be specific, the tempo, the rhythm, and the mode have been found to exert characteristic emotional stimulations. However, all observations have been made, as far as we can see, on people within our present culture. Primitive, Chinese, Greek music may convey moods and excitement not perceptible by us. And people of other cultures may respond differently to our music than do the subjects examined so far. The only common factor in all forms of music is perhaps a basic rhythm. Future comparative study of musical expressions in different cultures may reveal whether a basic rhythm exists which affects all human beings in the same way, while other musical expressions may have an altogether different and perhaps even opposite meaning in various cultures.

There can be no doubt that music constitutes a “language.” Each culture apparently has its own musical language, which may break up into separate dialects. We witness on our American scene the co-existence of various musical dialects, which are understood only by those familiar with each. Jazz, popular, classical, modern, and atonal music use completely different forms of expression; some people are familiar only with one or the other and may reject all the other forms. By and large, those familiar with the more advanced forms, historically and artistically, can “understand” the less complicated forms, although they may not like them as well, but the less “advanced” listener cannot comprehend the more elaborate and complex musical lan-

*It seems that music preceded language as a form of communication. Primitive speech may have developed from the rude music of early group vocalizations. According to Stumpf, music had its first beginning in the signal call; more recently, Schoen stated that tunes can carry the meaning of words, because words are in themselves only sounds.
guage. Therefore, it seems unwarranted to assume a correlation between an individual's personality and his preference for a type of music or composer. While certain personality factors may enter the picture, musical preference is probably more affected by social contacts, through identification with people who have a definite taste or affinity for certain musical dialects and styles, used by certain composers.

The effects of music on the individual will, therefore, depend on the individual’s understanding of the music he hears. Training and past experiences probably provide the basis for the unconscious interpretation of music. We will obtain a clearer picture of emotional reactions to music through exploration of the language of music and its meaning for each individual and for groups. Music is a group phenomenon; it expresses group conventions. Its language and communication is nonverbal, but, nevertheless, definite.

A small episode may demonstrate this point. Amongst friends I sometimes try to describe one of the persons present through improvisation on the piano. On one occasion, at a party, I was induced by the hostess to do so without knowing many of the people; they were not too interested in this kind of “game,” anyhow. After I played, I met open opposition. How can one recognize a person from what I had played? It happened that a professional musician, the guitarist Richard Pick of the Chicago School of Music, was present. I did not know him, and he did not know the person I had in mind. But in the confusion after my playing he stepped in and explained the person as he could see him from my playing. Whereupon a number of people immediately recognized the person I had in mind. Mr. Pick “understood” my musical jargon; the others did not.

It is probably this nonverbal communication, inherent in music, which not only explains its emotional significance, but its influence on interpersonal relationships. Naturally, anyone who does not want to listen to music is not affected in any positive way by it; if he definitely does not want to listen, he will be as angry by this form of communication as through a verbal approach. But most people like—or at least do not mind—to listen to music. This is in sharp contrast to verbal communication. People are often allergic to words. For this reason anything that stops people from talking improves human relationships. A teacher who loses her voice temporarily through laryngitis will find her class more quiet and cooperative; a mother may experience the same “improvement” with her children under similar circumstances. One of the first lessons a mother has to learn in our Child Guidance Centers—and one of the most difficult—is to keep quiet, to stop talking. Words are no longer effective in situations of conflict and antagonism. It is not merely the confusion of words which makes people allergic to talk; it is the use of words as weapons, to provoke, humiliate, and overpower each other, which is responsible for the breakdown of verbal communication. This is particularly true for all people who are emotionally disturbed, angry, hostile, and discouraged. They cannot be reached by words. The psychotic particularly is outside of the common logic as expressed by language.

Wherever verbal communication has ceased, music can still establish communication. It does not induce the antagonism so often created by the use of certain words. Communication through music does not provoke defense mechanisms. It eliminates any reference to areas of friction which are almost automatically touched as soon as words are used; the question of being right, of knowing more, of agreeing or disagreeing—all these controversial potentialities of verbal communication are absent in musical communication. Music links and does not divide.

These qualities inherent in music make it an ideal medium for social integration. On occasions of mass activities music is almost indispensable. In our culture music was originally of religious character, used for religious ceremonies. Some primitive forms of music were used for military purposes (drums and trumpet). Then came the social and political utilization of music, dances, marches, patriotic songs, etc. The musical effect is twofold: it unites the group, integrating each individual into the whole; and it sets an emotional tonus for the particular purpose of group activity. The net result of both aspects is not only a feeling of belonging in each member, but also, what is more important, a feeling of being alike. Music eliminates individual distinctions; it levels off inequalities in status. It has an equalizing effect on all those in its spell.

This analysis of music indicates strong therapeutic potentialities; the dynamic principles of such therapeutic influence also become clear. We must keep in mind that all emotional and mental disorders express social maladjustment. Emotions are not generated in a vacuum; they do not “emerge” from within an isolated person. Emotions are always an expression of an attitude of the individual for or against something in his environment. Emotions are the moving force which the individual generates to give him force and impetus in his movements toward or against others.19 Music, expressing and stimulating emotion, links one with the other, integrates each with the group. In this sense, music overcomes antagonism, isolation, nonparticipation. The strongest effect of music therapy is consequently achieved in group settings, as a form of group therapy.

This does not mean that the therapeutic use of music is
limited to group approaches. Listening alone, or playing alone, can have therapeutic effects also. Listening constitutes a willingness and ability to accept communications from others, the composer, the players, swinging with their mood, their rhythm, submitting to their stimulations. The beneficial effects of playing, on the other hand, cannot be explained in this way, on the strength of "communication" alone. It seems that the musical structure, the syntax and grammar expressed through rhythm and harmonies, may have some bearing on the benefit of music for a disturbed person. It permits an expression of emotions in an organized way. Even antagonistic emotions of anger and disgust can be expressed in a natural order of rhythm and harmony. Music implies order; and order is the enemy of a disturbed person, who rebels against order, when it is presented to him in the accustomed way. Again, the effects of music lie in its subtle and unaccustomed approach, circumventing the disdainful and often verbal channels in which the pressure of society and its order has been experienced. A psychotic patient who does not communicate with anyone and does not share the common sense and logic of the people around him, remains within this world of the others when he plays a piece he has learned, or reads music. Sometimes the established order of a composition cannot be fully accepted by the patient, and it may transgress through distortion. His therapeutic progress may then be measured by the diminution of his deviations from the original composition.

Even unstructured improvisation implies a certain amount of orderliness, although, again, the kind of improvisation may indicate therapeutic progress through its increased orderliness. There is at least communication between the player and the therapist. Michel found that music may stimulate increased verbalization in certain patients. We have reports that using improvisation to describe people (father, mother, etc.) sometimes led to the verbalization of very traumatic and disturbing episodes with the persons who first could be "discussed" only through music.

The social character of music makes its effects most obvious if it is used as a group medium. Listening together is more than responding to the communication of the music. The listener becomes a part of the group of people who all participate in the same experience. It requires a minimum of active participation and, therefore, is within reach of even very withdrawn patients. This is borne out by the observation that an unintended but, nevertheless, marked development of positive relationships of patients occurred during the music period. This development of closer relationships then led inevitably to increased and more meaningful communication expressed by better and more frequent verbalization of feelings and personal problems. Particip-

ularly for psychotic patients, the common music experience is a reopening of a common ground with the surrounding social group, the beginning of a shared logic, which was abandoned in a psychosis based entirely on the patient's inner private logic. If such results are possible through mere passive participation, it is obvious that active participation must have even stronger therapeutic effects. It requires a greater degree of social interest, a feeling of belonging, a willingness to cooperate with others.

Even a rather primitive activity in a rhythm band indicates the patient's willingness and ability to take part in the group. Such participation expresses his growing feeling of belonging, and in turn intensifies it. The demands of the group are perceived without rebellion, facilitating a reorientation of a patient toward the meaning of social living, a process essential for all therapeutic endeavors. Rhythm and harmony are acceptable symbols of order, in contrast to its other requirements which still may be rejected. The individual who keeps time gives up his isolated rebellion and antagonism toward others. He stops being against them. He experiences the satisfaction of contributing, of doing instead of getting, of being a part of a team, of the enjoyment of teamwork. All these experiences counteract the basic mechanisms of neurosis, psychosis, and character disorders.

Music therapy, being in this sense group psychotherapy, shares another fundamental aspect with the latter. The therapeutic effect of group psychotherapy is to a significant degree based on a new form of social participation, namely, as an equal to others. In every group therapy the individual deficiencies, symptoms, and maladjustments are deprived of their stigma. This is in contrast to the social conventions outside of a therapy group. Fear of not measuring up, of not being good enough as one is, is an important causative factor in emotional and mental disturbances. Group psychotherapy counters those cultural influences which are endangering the emotional stability and social adjustment of all. Here the patient learns that he has a place in the group, despite all his individual shortcomings. A basic human fellowship can be established and maintained. Whenever group psychotherapy or music therapy is introduced in an institution, it has an impact on the social climate and the interpersonal relationships throughout the place. Altshuler observed that the effect of music therapy upon the attendants in an institution is as important as the benefits to the patient.

Group psychotherapy, and music therapy as one form of it, are establishing new social values in the minds of the participants, values not yet existing in our society but essential for democratic living. The tremendous increase of all forms of group
psychotherapy indicates a deeply felt need for an opportunity to be oneself, to let one's hair down, so to say, without fear of ridicule or humiliation, to escape this emotional isolation characteristic of our way of living, particularly in the big cities. In this sense the emergence of a group like Alcoholics Anonymous constitutes part of a social revolution, although unnoticed by most. It is here for the first time that membership in a recognized society does not require special assets and accomplishments, but the open admission of a deficiency, and a very degrading one, indeed. One cannot become a member of A.A. unless one admits being a drunkard. A new phase of social organization has begun. It is essentially the democratic phase of society where each citizen is sure of his social place as an equal to others despite individual differences, accomplishments, or deficiencies. In this sense music therapy also takes its place in the cultural evolution, bringing the concept of the dignity of man and of respect for each individual into mental institutions, schools for the retarded, into reformatories, into all niches and holes where the deficient or degraded may congregate. Music therapy establishes by its very existence an act of mutual respect, in contrast to so many verbal expressions of a friendly understanding not followed up by deeds.

Because of its unpretentious character, of the humility of its workers who do not compete in the hierarchy of the therapeutic professions, music therapy can be established where other more specialized techniques may not be feasible. Every effort should be made to secure for music therapists status in the field of group psychotherapy. For this reason the present efforts to establish high professional standards for the training and qualifications of music therapists is the more important, since the present process of enlarging therapeutic and remedial services to a vast and greater number of people in need evokes a tendency of established professional groups to guard their “vested” interest against the newcomers who seek to encroach.

One by-product of the increased use of music for therapeutic purposes will be its necessary research into all aspects of music which eventually will enrich and stimulate the field of musicology. Music therapy has only begun to make its mark; its growth within a very few years may indicate the far-reaching significance which it may obtain within a short period of time, far beyond the scope which its original practitioners ever could have envisaged.

References


