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## **Exploring Classical Music As Music Therapy Alexander Tentser, Ph.D.<sup>1,2</sup>, Anna Glender, MFA<sup>1,3,4</sup>**

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For many people, music therapy makes them think of playing a drum set in rock group, or singing in a choir. Another group thinks of "new age" music or "easy listening" as music therapy. The fact is, any type of music can be used for therapeutic purposes if it satisfies the specific needs of the person involved. For this article we will explore classical music and what kinds of therapeutic responses it can trigger.

Many people experienced the beauty of art in their childhood, attending performances of Tchaikovsky's ballets "The Nutcracker", "Swan Lake" and "The Sleeping Beauty". The combination of music and dance keeps us in a trance from the beginning to the end, forgetting the real world in the beautiful fairy-tale dream. Used as therapy, this music and pure joy associated with positive childhood memories, can create a powerful healing combination. Western civilization developed melody and harmony as the most important musical functions. Tchaikovsky was one of the greatest melodists in music history and we instinctively respond to the beauty and splendor of his music.

Later on, as adults, we may appreciate the combination of clever words and music in the operas of Mozart "The Marriage of Figaro" and "Don Giovanni" or the intensity of emotional conflict in the opera "Carmen" by Bizet. Great Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi composed numerous operas containing beautiful and catchy tunes inspired by Italian folk music, and many generations of music connoisseurs were raised on them. We can name just a few, such as "Rigoletto", "Aida" and supremely romantic "La Traviata". These pieces intensely engage our hearing, emotions and thoughts. This can keep an adult "busy" brain occupied with sensual experiences other than pain and sorrow triggers, and allow the vibration of the music to move and uplift the body. The harmony, the second important musical function, creates multiple overtones which resonate with human energetic body creating the feeling of pleasure and comfort.

The phenomenon of Baroque music entrainment is very well understood and studied. There is more research on therapeutic effect of Baroque music than anything else. Since many of the compositions in 1600-1700 were created in approximately the 60 to 80 beats per minute rhythmic range, they entrain with human hearts perfectly. Science shows a reduction in anxiety symptoms and a lowering of blood pressure. This music may also trigger a "relaxation" response. Several of my students reported that they felt sleepy after listening to it for more than 10 minutes. Being sleepy is not a bad thing, instead, they most likely lacked the kind of relaxation in their daily life which they experienced during the listening sessions. It demonstrated a need that was unmet for both the body and the brain. In order to get more emotional arousal, faster Baroque dances can be used. Listen, for example, to "Water Music" by G. F. Handel.

Classical music may also tie us more fully to the natural environment. Too many people in today's urban and city environments do not get enough contact with nature. Appropriate contact with nature allows the body to return to a more coherent state. One of the most popular classical composers is Antonio Vivaldi. His Baroque masterpiece "The Seasons" has incredibly close connections with nature. The seasonal changes – (chattering teeth in "Winter", torrents of rains in "Summer", birds' dialogue in "Spring") are all supreme examples of the beauty of nature expressed in music through the sounds of the string instruments. In fact, there are several composers who undertook the task of cataloging the birds' calls.

Another sublime composer of great perfection is Felix Mendelssohn. In addition to the famous violin concerto, I would highly recommend his "Italian" and "Scottish" Symphonies. His orchestral overture "The Hebrides" (The Fingal's Cave) is the musical version of an enthrallingly descriptive sea voyage and storm.

Classical music is also emotive. It allows the listener to release emotions. It engages the heart uplifting the soul, it stimulates emotional release reaching catharsis and creating powerful healing. For example, Tchaikovsky composed one of the finest nineteenth century orchestral pieces - Symphonic Overture "Romeo and Juliette". If you are not familiar with this piece you will enjoy its dramatic contrasts and beautiful melodies. His Orchestral Fantasy "Francesca da Rimini" after Dante is also sublime and emotionally powerful. Even though the music tells a tragic story it creates a powerful emotional release.

One of the most emotionally therapeutic composers, is Franz Schubert. The beautiful songfulness and lyrical nature of his music is truly unique. I would highly recommend listening to both of his Piano Trios, to his beautiful piano sonatas, particularly the last one in B flat Major, his "Unfinished" Symphony, his monumental Symphony #9, his transcended String Quintet in C major.

The music of Beethoven must be mentioned separately. Among the monumental nine symphonies, thirty-two piano sonatas, numerous string quartets, five piano concertos and a great violin concerto, anyone can find pages and pages of music that resonate with

the state of mind and heart. If you enjoy small compositions by Beethoven, such as “For Elise”, I would continue the listening experience with the “Moonlight” Piano Sonata, and Symphony #1 and #3. There is so much power in Beethoven’s music, stemming from the fact he had to overcome his handicap of approaching deafness to continue composing. In his last Symphony #9, in the last choral movement “Ode to Joy” to Schiller’s words, we experience universality of freedom and joy through musical expression. Beethoven generates the most powerful energy and desire to live the life fully.

Most of the classical music pieces that have been selected above were composed in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The reason for it is that the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reflected the conflicts and catastrophes of the era. Therefore, I would not use many of them for therapeutic purposes. We would need to be more selective with the music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century composers produced numerous works that are truly beautiful and healing. Classical music requires concentration, but the experience is often sublime. Many of these works remain the most profound and emotionally charged examples of music today.

Bio:

Dr. Alexander Tentser and his wife Anna Glender are extraordinary musicians located in the greater Tucson, AZ area. Both academics, their many years of professional performance provides deep depth in the beauty of their music. They are available for both concert performances and advanced teaching. For more information on upcoming performances and rates please contact: [aatentser@msm.com](mailto:aatentser@msm.com)

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