



April 2022

Volume 22 Number 2

Music Therapy: How do you choose the correct music to help yourself? **Alexander Tentser, Ph.D.^{1,2}, Anna Glender, MFA^{1,3,4}**

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In today's society, with access to music from lots of different sources, how does one choose the most appropriate music to nurture oneself, when one is on a healing journey? Music means different things for different people. Generally, we all agree it has therapeutic and even healing qualities, but from this point on the opinions diverge significantly.

First, what is our understanding of music? A meaningful pattern of pleasing sounds? This description fits one definition of a melody but does not describe the multitudes of sound and rhythmic patterns from folk and classical music to rock, pop and other genres. Tastes differ, if the intentionally distorted sound of bass guitar is appealing to one set of people, others find solace and pleasure in the soothing sounds of classical string instruments. Moreover, the understanding of what is beautiful or ugly, appropriate, or out of the question, varies according to the era and cultural trends accompanying it.

In popular music, for example, trends tend to cycle approximately every ten years or so. The greatest bands in the pop or rock music history rarely stay together longer than that; however, there may be exceptions. The Rolling Stones, for example, have had an exceptionally long and productive career. If you look further a field at avant garde composers you can find many that are beloved for 30, 40 even 50 years. Look at classical music and folk music, there are communities which adore the music hundreds and even thousands of years.

To help us to understand the range of music that is listened to, explored, played and cherished, we should begin with the concept that any vibrational energy, which musical sounds activate to different degrees, comes in direct contact with individual human vibrational energy. If we look at a human body as a musical instrument tuned to different pitches, we will discover that the human body entrains itself with different sounds/frequencies produced from the outside. And we are genetically programmed to react to very loud screeching sounds, such as sirens, for example. They represented

danger and activate our fight- or- flight response. This was important to human survival and evolution.

Much of what we seek when using music for therapeutic purposes has to do with a search for *comfort and safety*. For example: the paradox of art development tells us that in economically underdeveloped and totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, the art – (music, poetry, and literature) was of supreme importance. Of course, this search also had a lot to do with an inability to express the true emotions in safety, so artists created a double language of high symbolism where initiated people would understand the meanings of books, music, and painting. While the official art served as a propaganda tool, on a more subtle level, artists created works of sublime quality speaking directly to the hearts of people.

History often serves as a filter to channel the most important and truly best artists, who speak to the hearts of people. The reason J. S. Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, and many other composers are revered in the Western, and currently, in the Eastern societies, is that they are not just great composers. There were others who were also accomplished artists, but these special ones reached people on a different level. Bach and Mozart blended the supreme knowledge of musical craft and tremendous intellectual discipline with human emotions that spoke to humanity in a language we all relate to. So, when seeking the most effective music to provide therapeutic qualities, one should select *music which they feel arises from and creates, the perfect balance of reason and emotion*.

Next, in the selection of the correct music for support is the aspect of *empathy*. Mozart's great works composed between 1781 and 1791 affect humans on many levels. Intellectually, they are perfectly constructed and architecturally beautiful. But they are much more than just perfect designs, they appeal strongly on an emotional level. We find the full range of emotions in compositions such as Symphony #40 in G minor or Symphony #41, "The Jupiter" in C Major. We, as individuals, must experience all emotions, from dark to exalting, to become fully developed as humans. Without this essential experience we will lack empathy. This empathy is necessary for a caring and supportive society. The feeling and understanding of beauty that great music evokes in us is indispensable. Apart from nature and arts, we have very limited resources to tap into the unlimited potential of beauty. Science is extremely important for human progress and well-being, but without the arts we will not be completely human. In Ancient Greece philosophers and scholars understood it and the art was a mandatory subject in Greek Lyceum.

Catharsis, is the next aspect vital in an understanding of the process of selection of music for therapeutic purposes. When seeking catharsis, we begin by appreciating a range of musical compositions. For example: very few listeners can attend and appreciate a performance of Bruckner's or Mahler's symphonies that last over an hour. To do so requires a great deal of concentration and some preliminary preparation to fully appreciate this music. But, if we are willing to give it a try, we may find and relate to a spiritual quest, a journey of a soul, and reap multiple benefits from it. Music of this kind does not provide quick pleasurable experience; it may include tragic and profoundly dark life stages the composers went through. But the catharsis that music provides is worth it. Put simply, music assists willing listeners in their spiritual journey. Music comforts us and tells us that we are not alone in this universe and people experienced joys and sorrows many times over before us.

Let us explore Arnold Schoenberg's music, for a moment. He truly believed he was opening new trends in composition using his twelve-tone system. His system became one of the most influential musical systems in the twentieth century music language. It is the most controlled and mathematical of all, however, even in the professional music world, twelve-tone compositions are not performed very frequently. Why? There are many professional performers who can learn this complicated music, but the problem is, the general audience does not relate very well to it. It is difficult for general cognition and requires a lot of educational preparation, even for a listener. However, so-called “randomly composed” music, or as it is also called “chance music” has therapeutic properties, and in fact its proponent, John Cage, linked it to meditation. So, a *relationship* to the music which triggers a *spiritual journey* becomes important.

Popular music also provides many wonderful opportunities to feel romantic joys and sorrows. The songs composed by Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Jerome Kern in 1920-30 remain unsurpassed in their perfection of a very accessible two-to-three-minute form, and intense emotional expression. The first thing that grabs us and makes us listen is a beautiful and memorable melody. Unobtrusive dance rhythms, such as foxtrot, make us sway and feel the beautiful flow of energy. Jazz, in general, has a wonderful capacity of energizing us without edginess and aggressiveness. Artists, such as Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Art Tatum, and later, Oscar Peterson and Chick Corea, made so many people happy, particularly during the great depression of 1929-1936. Again, we see the reflection in the music and lyrics of reason, emotion, empathy, catharsis, relationship and movement toward a spiritual journey.

As more people live more comfortable lives in today's developed countries than at any previous era, the search for other than economic goals greatly diminished. Nowadays, a professional synthesizer can reproduce any sounds very realistically so the availability of quality sound is available to many people. Phones, computers, radio's, television, movies all have the capacity to create sound in ways that support personal healing. We possess all the tools we need to be successful in music making, and yet, understanding music as a science, art, and as an aspect of healing in the proper context in modern society is lagging. Music is a sphere of life that is open to anyone willing to experience it. Selecting music which has personal meaning, reason, emotion, empathy, creates catharsis, establishes a relationship and movement toward a spiritual journey will support the health and healing of the person listening most effectively.

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

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