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The Music of Healing
by Karen R. Nelson

News Source: National Endowment for the Arts

Website: www.nea.gov

From the siren's serenade to sweeping national anthems or rousing gospel hymns, music has long claimed powers of temptation and salvation. The idea that music can affect healing and behavior is at least as old as the writings of Aristotle and Plato.

Music has been embraced by the masses, chained to commercials pushing chicken or sneakers, and still managed to maintain its beauty and mystique. Now science -- the great explainer of many mysteries -- has turned its inquisitive eye to harnessing music's magic. Modern medicine has taken to heart what ancient peoples have practiced for centuries.

"Music therapy," according to Mathew Lee, Acting Director of the Rusk Institute in New York, "has been an invaluable tool with many of our rehabilitation patients. There is no question that the relationship of music and medicine will blossom because of the advent of previously unavailable techniques that can now show the effects of music."

Music therapy has been advancing as a profession and medical tool since the post World War I and II eras when community musicians began playing for thousands of veterans recovering from physical and emotional trauma. They discovered that music could help alleviate pain, calm or relax patients and counteract depression, and encourage movement as part of physical rehabilitation. The resulting successes led hospitals to call for the hiring of musicians. When it became apparent that the musicians needed some prior training, the demand grew for a college curriculum. In 1944, Michigan State University established the world's first music therapy degree program. Shortly afterwards in 1950, the National Association for Music Therapy was founded to help ensure that practicing music therapists were qualified to heal.

A music therapist is often part of a team of doctors, social workers, teachers, parents or psychologists which assesses the patient's or client's condition and sets the goals for recovery. A therapist, trained to anticipate how a certain type or application of music will affect behavior, will devise structured activities which could include singing, playing instruments, movement, composition, or listening. Although patients using music therapy may develop musical skills, the goal is not to train musicians, but to improve -- through music -- physical, social or emotional skills; to help people regain their health and speed recovery.

Dr. Oliver Sacks, in *Awakenings*, said, "I regard music therapy as a tool of great power in many neurological disorders -- Parkinson's and Alzheimer's -- because of its unique capacity to organize or reorganize cerebral function when it has been damaged." Sacks also reports that patients with neurological disorders who cannot talk or move are often able to sing, and sometimes even dance, to music.

While music therapy may still be edging into public consciousness, many different populations are already benefitting from its application. Some schools have taken the lead in using the arts to improve students' ability to learn. They have begun to hire therapists or other specialists who use music to strengthen nonmusical areas such as communication, physical coordination, teamwork, or even math.

The media spotlight has recently shown on studies which quantify the value of arts in education. According to the College Entrance Examination Board, students of the arts continue to outperform their

non-arts peers on the Scholastic Assessment Test. In 1995, for example, SAT scores for students who studied the arts more than four years were 59 points higher on the verbal and 44 points higher on the math portion than students with no coursework or experience in the arts. Richard W. Riley, the U.S. Secretary of Education, commented, "The process of studying and creating art in all of its distinct forms defines those qualities that are at the heart of education reform in the 1990s -- creativity, perseverance, a sense of standards, and above all, a striving for excellence."

Music therapy is also commonly found in nursing homes, where it is often incorporated into the daily schedule of activities. In the early 1980s, before turning to journalism, I was a budding music therapist working in a southern Minnesota nursing home. Perhaps, my most valuable role was as a roving flutist. I played familiar hymns or old tunes to residents who were bedridden, severely depressed, or dying of cancer. Although a few of the nurses thought it was a frivolous venture at best, I found some of the elderly folks I visited were able to hum or sing along, and recall the times and family associated with the tune. These brief moments of recognition were a small yet vivid proof of connection. While I didn't continue as a music therapist, I still find the application of music to the science of healing a fascinating arena.

If the value of music therapy is still being quantified, the stories of people who have been helped by music offer compelling testimony. Ida Goldman, a 90-year old woman who spoke at a Senate hearing, said, "Before I had surgery, they told me I could never walk again. But when I sat and listened to music, I forgot all about the pain." (Goldman walked with assistance during the hearing.) Recent research has pointed to the value of music and the arts in treating Alzheimer's disease, strokes and related dementias.

Carei Thomas, a jazz pianist in Minneapolis, woke from minor surgery in 1993 to near paralysis. Thomas was a victim of Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a rare inflammatory disorder of the nerves near the brain and spinal chord. Right from the beginning, his recovery was driven by music. Friends played for him in the hospital, a benefit was held by the arts community; and perhaps most importantly, Thomas' own desire to return to music and performing spurred major progress. He is now walking with canes and playing keyboard using his hands in a more percussive manner. He has also turned to spoken word performances.

As new research continues to back the value of music in therapy and areas including education and reform, the music therapy profession and its uses continue to expand. Therapists can be found in hospitals, nursing homes, treatment centers, psychiatric wards, prisons, group homes and schools. There are professional music therapy sites growing internationally including the Association of Professionals and Students of Music Therapy in Sao Paulo, Brazil, a Music Therapy Centre to be built in the southern Bosnian town of Mostar, and the 8th World Congress of Music Therapy held last July Hamburg, Germany. Healthy individuals are turning to drumming and playing other instruments to relieve stress and improve concentration. Listening to certain types of music can ease the delivery of babies or motivate people to exercise. "Simply put," said Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, "music can heal people."

MORE INFORMATION

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Music without words means leaving behind the mind. And leaving behind the mind is meditation. Meditation returns you to the source. And the source of all is sound. — Kabir

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