



Music Therapy in a Canadian Retirement Home - A Model to Support the World Health Organization's Policy on "Active Ageing".

Christopher Eriksson PhD

Milton, Ontario, Canada

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*Corresponding author: Christopher Eriksson PhD

Milton, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Approaching classical music as a sacred art form has proved therapeutic and enjoyable for residents of a Canadian retirement home, allowing individual seniors in a group setting to experience great beauty and harmony within themselves. Facilitating this with Adlerian principles of choice, equality, and social connectedness has been seen to reinvigorate perceptions of self in some, enhance feelings of belonging, as well as provide practical tools to help reset moods and memories when desired. Such evidence-based music programs have the potential to be an effective model with which to implement the mental health and social connectedness goals of the WHO's active ageing program to reduce the rising numbers of seniors developing dementia.

Keywords: Music Therapy, Seniors, Adlerian Group Interventions, Social Interest/Social Feeling, WHO Active Ageing, Dementia, Retirement Homes.

Introduction

The World Health Organization has estimated that by 2050, the number of persons 60+ years of age will have tripled from 600 million in 2000 to 2 billion, meaning that one in five persons will be 60+ years of age by the year 2050 (WHO, 2011).

Responding to this projected significant increase in older adults, the WHO formulated a policy framework for **active ageing**, in which mental health and social connectedness are considered to be as important as improved physical health status. These social connections are viewed as being necessary to reduce the risks of neurodegeneration and the development of dementia that has been estimated to be present in more than half of residents in modern nursing homes (Huber et al, 2012; Ridder & Wheeler (2015, 368). The private retirement home in Ontario referred to in this report has a separate section for retirees living with memory loss, which adds to the importance of these statistics for nursing homes and long-term health care centres. But it also provides opportunities to promote and generate more evidence-based music programs like the one reported on here to facilitate achievement of the WHO's objectives on **active ageing**.

The WHO's desired goals and outcomes of improved mental health and social connections in its **active ageing** policy clearly equate with those goals of Adlerian psychotherapy. Improved mental

health and social connectedness is a feature of Adlerian psychology and the overall goal of Adlerian therapy:

The patient must be guided away from himself, towards productivity for others... All my efforts are devoted towards increasing the social interest of the patient. I know that the real reason for his malady is his lack of cooperation, and I want him to see it too. As soon as he can connect himself with his fellowmen on an equal footing, he is cured. (Adler, 1956, as cited in Ansbacher, 1968, p.143)

Evidence-based music therapy is used to treat a range of medical conditions which directly or indirectly help to improve mental health and social integration, including the neurologically impaired such as those with dementia (Wheeler, 2015; Ridder and Wheeler, 2015; Eriksson, 2017, p.247). As the neurologist and author Oliver Sacks has observed:

Music is no luxury to patients with dementia, it is a necessity. (Sacks, 2007, p.347).

Yet music therapy is still not generally offered as a primary treatment in dementia care. (Ridder and Wheeler, 2015, p.370).

More than half a century ago, Rudolph Dreikurs who was a physician, musician, and Adlerian therapist, led the way in

articulating the social benefits of music therapy (Dreikurs, 1953, p.19: cited in Eriksson, 2017, 2022).

Music is a group phenomenon; it expresses group conventions. Its language and communication is nonverbal, but, nevertheless, definite... Music links and does not divide. These qualities inherent in music make it an ideal medium for social integration... The musical effect is two-fold: it unites the group, integrating each individual into the whole; and it sets an emotional tonus for the particular 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.

Music therapist Suzanne Hanser in *The New Music Therapist's Handbook* (1999, p.142) acknowledged the social benefits of music as a group phenomenon but added that music provides a structure within which there is individual freedom and creativity:

Music is organized sound in time (Bernstein & Picker, 1966). While it is a highly structured art form, it accommodates individual interpretation and creativity. While an entire group of people are engaged in a musical activity, no two are expressing themselves in precisely the same way. Thus, it provides a format for learning about one's own unique manner of approaching the creative process, expressing oneself, interacting with others, and organizing and interpreting artistic material (p.142).

It is this individual freedom and creativity in group music therapy that is able to reinvigorate the perception of self in those with dementia as reported in the literature on music therapy. (Ridder and Wheeler, 2015, 367-378)

Music therapy in its various forms has been shown to promote communication between carers and patients with dementia, and to have a positive impact on reducing anxiety and aggressive behaviour, restoring cognitive and motor function, and improving overall quality of life. (Wall and Duffy, 2010, p. 113; Ridder and Wheeler, 2015, p. 370). In a metareview Hulme et al (2010) found evidence that music interventions and music therapy contribute to improving food intake and to reducing behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia, such as agitation, aggression, wandering, restlessness, irritability, and social and emotional difficulties. Using preferred music was emphasized for lowering agitation.

Involvement in active music making or music listening, along with social engagement, is known to be important to older adults who like music, are motivated by it, and desire a social life. (Theorell & Kreutz, 2012). This has been evident in the group music sessions offered to current residents at a retirement home in Ontario, Canada. Almost every session has concluded with enthusiastic clapping and has gone over the allotted time and with requests for a particular composer next time. One lady in a wheelchair attending for the first time at my invitation told me that the session had been the highlight of her day. I had seen her in her wheelchair by herself in another room looking at a jigsaw puzzle when I told her about the music program in a room nearby that was about to begin. She followed me into the room and was most happy to participate and contribute.

The Group Music Program Reported on Here

The music sessions were scheduled twice per month for one-hour mid-morning. The music program was promoted to the retirement home's management as a potential contribution to the well-being of the residents and seniors through facilitating a personal individual feeling of "**beauty and harmony**" through classical music available on www.youtube.com. This was shared with the residents through PowerPoint slides and flyers that included comments by famous musicians on the healing power of music including modern musicians such as Elton John, in addition to others like cellist Pablo Casals, and Gabriel Fauré who is reported as saying that "music exists to elevate us as far as possible above everyday life." In the *Music Therapy Handbook* (Wheeler 2015, 126), the editors quote the biographer André Maurois on the ability of beautiful music such as Beethoven to profoundly affect human emotions. This comment shown below was shared with the residents along with others on flyers handed out at the beginning of a session:

Everything that I had thought and been unable to express was sung in the wordless phrases of these symphonies. When that mighty river of sound began to flow, I let myself be carried on its waters. My soul was bathed and purified... The music called me back to kindness, charity, and love.

Individual experiences and comments are invited and shared with the group in a facilitated social setting after the playing of the music piece.

A film clip from the popular movie **The Sound of Music** with Christopher Plummer and Julie Andrews was shown in the early sessions to set the scene and illustrate the power of music to transform us through a celebrated film that nearly all had seen and recognized. The clip showed Christopher Plummer through his facial expression being transfixed by the sound of unexpected singing. The children's singing grabs hold of him and opens his closed off heart so that he now wants to learn and experience more. On hearing his own children's singing, he joins with them in their group singing, opens his heart to them, and becomes friendly and loving; this instead of being aloof and agitated a few minutes previously when he was ready to fire Julie Andrews and send her packing back to the abbey! Periodically as facilitator, I would mention that these individual experiences are within us. Yes, there were physical strings being played on musical instruments that went to our ears. But we each have strings in our hearts and minds that were being sounded and played. They agreed that this was amazing and worthy of our wonder and delight.

Adler recommends that therapists and facilitators should be striving themselves to gain some very definite abilities for their job at hand (Holub, 1935, p.87):

To be a therapist, artistic ability is required, which cannot be achieved without mature self-understanding, ready wit, the ability to convince, being convinced yourself, and to cooperate.

Holub in response added:

These are high requirements. But I believe that rather than be frightened by them, it is better to consider them as part of an endless task whose solution we never reach, but which we can, however, gradually approach.

As the facilitator myself of these musical sessions I must acknowledge that I grew up in a musical home loving classical music. My mother was a professional opera singer and my father a clarinetist. Not having my parents' playing abilities I went into science instead. Yet music is a living part of who I am. I see life, Nature, and the Universe running on the principles of musical harmony along the lines of modern string theory in physics, whilst striving myself to develop, unfold, and fully understand my own musical nature along with others.

My approach as facilitator has been to inspire the residents to experience the beauty of music within themselves as Martin Lings (2006, 1-5) has explained:

The true and original purpose of art is to communicate secrets, not by blurting them out, but by offering them as it were with half-open hand, by bringing them near and inviting us to approach...This casts a spell over us and momentarily changes us, doing as it were the impossible and making us quite literally excel ourselves, as if we were God's spies.

I have discussed with the residents attending the similarities between music and speech, and how both forms produce harmonics that characterize each musical instrument as well as each person's speaking voice. This has been well received and appreciated.

Of the four distinct types of music therapy methods described by Gardstrom and Sorel (2015) and cited by Eriksson, 2017, 248): Receptive or listening, Composition, Improvisation, and Re-creative/Performance, the receptive or listening method has been the one that I have used with residents of this retirement home.

Despite the name, the clients are not passive in this listening approach. On the contrary, as facilitator, I invite and welcome each member of the group to respond to what they have heard and experienced. Often the faces of the attendees tell their own stories. They also listen to the comments from others which may be different from their own, and a discussion may ensue. I remind them that we do not all have the same musical tastes and that it's normal. The musical pieces played are mostly classical in nature, the attendees often requesting a particular composer or piece of music, which will be played at the next session. After playing an anxiety-producing piece bit of music, I will put on one that is soothing and calming to me and ask how they perceived it. Thus, each is informed and reminded of how they can calm themselves if they get upset or feel out of sorts on a given day.

Conclusion

The engaging and joy-filled response of the seniors in the retirement home reported here shows that there is a market for evidence-based group music therapy programs that are facilitated through a social psychology like Adler's or Person Centred Care . Extended to those seniors already experiencing memory loss and dementia and to their carers across retirement homes, the clinical evidence indicates that such group music programs would constitute a practical model for facilitating the WHO towards meeting its stated goals on active ageing. "A second music program in this seniors retirement home exclusively for those residents with memory loss will begin soon and will be written up for publication."

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