



Music and Healing: the Soft Power of the Sonic Essence

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Abstract

A lot of people and cultures hold firmly to the belief that music has the power to heal sicknesses. These people and cultures generally do not bother with the burden of proof. Somehow, they 'know' they are right. This conviction is a very old one. This paper is an attempt to look at the source of music's power to heal, the dimensions of healing, the type of music that heals, instances of healing and why this discussion is still attracting a lot of interests today. The conclusion is not farfetched. Music has power. The artful manipulation of the power of music through learning, revelation, association, tradition, cultic rituals, worship, and science can lead to an inexhaustible and manifold experiences including healing.

Keywords: *Music, Healing, Therapy, Sickness, Essence, Power*

Introduction

The title of this work may raise some eyebrows. The connection between music, whatever it means, and healing, however it is understood, is an obvious one. It is easy to claim that music can heal. The question is how? Healing was originally associated with the field of medicine but not anymore. Medical activities show that the field of healing is well outside and beyond the mere scientific approach to medicine which has confined its mechanisms and operations to cure and limited to the physiological. Whereas physicians have limited their comfort zone of operation to diagnosis, treatment and prevention of diseases, other aspects of human endeavour have virtually deepened and indeed coveted a higher and more encompassing realm of healing. Healing focuses on the whole person and not merely on a disease. Healing is about the total well being of the human person and so, not limited to the narrow confines of examining degenerating cells in one part of the body. Healing the whole being assumes a thorough understanding of the human being as a system and not a mechanical fusion of independent parts. Such disciplines include but are not limited to religion, meditation, sports, visual arts, psychology, and of course, the queen of the arts – music.



Music Simply Understood from Antiquity

Evidence from antiquity shows that a good knowledge of music is not an exclusive reserve or the prerogative of any given age. Music was here before man. The unique contributions of Greco-Roman civilization to the classical theory and aesthetics of Western music is of interest and significance. According to Weiss and Taruskin: (1984) “to the Greeks, music possessed ethos; that is, the power to influence its hearers’ emotions and behaviour, indeed their morals’ (1). The awesome power of music is in nowhere more celebrated and illustrated than in the legend of Orpheus. As told by the Roman poet, Ovid, Orpheus was the son of a Muse by a Thracian Prince. He had such uncommon skill at singing and playing the lyre that everything, animate and inanimate alike, was under his music spell. The first instance of his musical prowess was in saving his fellow Argonauts while they were bringing home the Golden Fleece and they came under attack from the seductive Sirens. He sang more persuasively than they could. His tragic death came by the hands of Thracian women who were overcome with jealousy and driven to the boundaries of frenzy by his music that they tore him to pieces while he was engrossed with the thought of his wife Eurydice more than pay attention to them. But it was the death of Eurydice that brought the best out of Orpheus. She died following snakebite and descended to the lower regions of the ghosts. But Orpheus followed her to the underworld and pleaded with the king and queen of the realm with great amount of love for his wife. It was so moving that the inhabitants could not resist his plea bargain and Eurydice was called back to life and given to Orpheus on the condition that he would not turn back to look at her face until they had emerged completely from the regions beneath. But Orpheus lost this gift because he could not resist looking at the beauty that was his wife and so Eurydice slipped back to the underworld, dying a second time.

Pythagoras, the mathematician and mystic philosopher is known to have invented the numerical relationship of musical intervals like in the octave, the fourth, the fifth, and the second. He first spoke about the inaudible ‘harmony of the spheres’.

Plato, among many Greek thinkers, evolved a musical idealism which *ethos*, made music the most powerful force for good as well as for evil and frowned at those who misused the power of



music for evil. He condemned the mere use of music for pleasure. This means that over and above the gift of musicality which came from the gods and from training, another form of learning was required for man to handle or manipulate this force and guide it towards good as well as steer it away from evil.

Aristotle, more than Plato, was down to earth with his approach to music. Music for him was a useful tool in education, in ritual, in entertainment and relaxation. Music should not be excessive and distracting. But Aristotle adds another element to music, a purely aesthetic brand of musical pleasure. He called it 'enthusiasm'. Aristotle rejected as part of musical education, 'training in material performance which is professional and competitive'. These promote vulgar pleasure.

Quintillian, in the first century, defended the inclusion of musical training in the education of a Roman orator on account of music's power to move minds and spirits. He advocated the "musicalization" of speech whereby speech imitates the rise and fall of musical inflections.

Shakespeare extols music beyond all arts. "The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds, Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils; The motions of his spirit are dull as night, And his affections dark as Erebus; Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music" (Merchant of Venice, Act V scene 1). Who can forget the famous quote from his twelfth Night? "If music be the food of love, play on". In all these, including the psalmody and synagogue traditions of the Hebrew and Greek traditions, the power of music to affect behaviour is deeply and consistently made manifest.

Music among Us

Music is a series of sound, humanly organized, ordered towards varied goals, ends and means. Every human culture has one form of music or another. Music in this sense fulfils certain roles for the people in their culture. Music permeates every aspect of a people's life. From cradle to grave, man remains a music-making or music-loving being. Man's life is inextricably tied to musical sounds.



When a woman is delivered of a baby, the news is often greeted with spontaneous singing and dancing as a natural expression of joy. This makes music a powerful instrument for communicating joy and happiness. The same thing happens with every breaking of good news. Even in football matches, it has been observed that most Africans dance when they score, though a more detailed analysis of this will be for another discussion in comparative cultural psychology in ethnomusicology. Even in the fields, people make music while working. At wrestling contexts, music making is central as an energizer for the contestants. During wars, music features both to summon the people and also to boost their morale to fight. In the performance of various rituals, music is employed both in its organized form and in the spontaneous outpouring which communicates essences with the spirits and mortals. Such music creates and sustains a sense of awe and respect for the event. Various celebrations and passage rites are necessarily accompanied with music. Marriages, naming ceremonies, burials and funerals are all occasions for music. Even to send a child to sleep requires lullabies; it is an art imbued with such sedative power that makes it possible in an instant. Even some adults often hold that certain forms of classical music in the adagio and andante movements lure them to sleep. This ability to condition the human person and dispose him for sleep is more powerful and better than a whole bunch of sedative pills.

In the field of sports, music is maximally employed not simply to synchronize ballet dancers' movements or choreographed aerobics but also as energy booster for competing teams. Thus, cheerleaders, supporters' or fan clubs all stand by the sideline singing, dancing, waving, and playing all manner of instruments to urge their teams to victory. These are open testaments to the fact and belief in that intrinsic power of music to accomplish certain set objectives.

In revolts and rebellions, riots and uprisings, music has been at the service of humanity. The bond it builds among people brought together by a common cause is formidable and absolute. The tune, "We shall overcome" has become synonymous and reminiscent of the black struggles for freedom in the United States. This is equally true of every region where the perennial human fight against injustice has been waged. This is true of South Africa, Biafra, Namibia and



Zimbabwe. Musicians of different genres have equally written and sung the aspirations and situations of people in musics that millions of earth's inhabitants have identified with at different times. Reggae musicians come to mind immediately especially from the root caste. Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, Max Romeo, I Roy, U Roy, Lucky Dube, Culture, Alpha Blondy, Eric Donaldson, Jimmy Cliff, Bujou Banton, Majek Fashek, etc have all sent their messages out to the human race and the force of their voices still propels them across different generations, touching lives, making impressions, awaking sleepy consciences and soothing troubled spirits. Such, perhaps, is the subtle nature and power of music which must not be seen or understood only from the image of the Israelites surrounding Jericho and blowing the trumpets that saw the walls tumbling down.

In Nigeria, many artists joined in the freedom fight for the emancipation of the oppressed people of South Africa. Other entertainment and philosophy-based musicians and minstrels abound. They include Celestine Ukwu, Osadebe, Oliver De Coque, Ozoemena Nsugbe, Ajani Obiligbo, Morocco Maduka, Afam Ogbuotobo, Nelly Uchendu, Onyeka Onwenu, Christy Essien Igbokwe, Ebenezer Obey, King Sunny Ade and others have left powerful impressions on the hearts of millions of Nigerians.

In religious circles, music is an indispensable agent for the God experience. Music in religion is not a mere time extender. It midwives the thoughts and words of man and gives it a new method of expression that mere words and poetry cannot achieve. We shall still look at the religious dimension in greater detail.

What they Say about Music Therapy

What is the overriding opinion about music therapy? This whole enterprise like a whole lot of other things began without a bold, conscious arrangement or road map but as a patriotic and philanthropic service by musicians who went from one hospital to another to cheer up soldiers who had all manner of physical and psychological trauma following the First and Second World Wars. This was of course in the United States, where else? The hospitals employed the services of musicians to help the healing processes of the sick soldiers but soon found out that they had



no ordered curriculum or well organized structure for what they were doing. Hence it was necessary to prepare a college curriculum.

But before the wars, while the French Revolution was on, an unknown author had written an article which appeared in Columbian Magazine in 1789 on “Music, Physically Considered”. More scholarly writings on the therapeutic essence of the musical were published by Edwin Atlee (1804) and by Samuel Matthews (1807). Both of them were students of Dr Benjamin Rush, a physician and psychiatrist and a great advocate of the valuable use of music in healing. Recorded experimentations in this area equally began in those early years of the 19th century. Different people, at different times, formed associations which tried to organize music as therapy, as education, as hospital activity and as healing process. Many countries of the world have national therapy associations. Such countries include but are not limited to Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hong Kong, Korea, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, and United Kingdom. It has to be pointed out, however, that the formal timeline for the study of music therapy as a specialized area must not becloud the truth that the informal use of music for healing is as old as human civilization. This was a natural discovery of the human spirit from one culture to another without any known recourse to common source.

A discussion concerning music and healing will be incomplete without a panoramic view of the activities involved in music therapy. Mereni, (2004) one of the foremost and consistent scholars in this area in Nigeria approaches the subject by making a clear distinction between the ordinary use of music for events, occasions, relaxations and a strict application of music for the purposes of therapy. For music to assume a therapeutic dimension, in the academic sense, the elements of intentionality, predictability, measurement, observation and relationships have to be established. “Therapeia” is the Greek word for “healing”. Without any prejudice to the academic understanding of the discipline called music therapy, the power of music can effect a curative intervention even when this is unintended.



According to Mereni, music therapy,” follows well thought–out principles and approaches.” (9). For Juliette Alvin holds that it is “the controlled use of music in the treatment, education, training and rehabilitation of children and adults suffering from physical, mental or emotional disorders” (1975: 4). Mereni highlights two distinguishing marks of music therapy. The first is that it seeks for the restoration of wholeness, addressing the psychosomatic needs of a patient – healing of mind and body. The second is that music therapy is a ‘controlled, controllable and repeatable process’. This, therefore, gives the natural art of music another status as science. There are, however, wide ranging agreements and disagreements among the practitioners of music therapy right from the concept to applications and methods and results. This casts a shadow of doubt on its major scientific claims. Mereni (1997) had in his seminal work identified five kinds of healing possible through music.

- Anxiolytic music therapy is supposed to exorcise deep rooted human anxiety and fear.
- Tensiolytic music therapy sees to the relief of physical and or mental pain caused by physical exertion
- Algolytic music therapy is physical pain specific.
- Psycholytic music therapy is supposed to free a man from evil forces.
- Patholytic music therapy takes care of sorrowful emotions, grief and guilt.

Forms of Sickness

What kind of sickness does music heal? We need to be clear about the dimensions of sickness. Every sickness is a health deficit. It is a minus. It is a step towards dying. It makes the whole person not function properly and optimally. Sicknesses affect the body and the mind and much more. There are five major classifications of sickness. These, in a certain sense, correspond to the five major forms of music therapy given by Mereni.



- ***Physiological sickness:*** This type of sickness is understood by some as physical sickness. It concerns the malfunctioning of one or more organs of the body. A problem in one part of the human organism affects the entire body. It could range from fracture, to diabetes, ulcers, hypoglycemia, high blood pressure.
- ***Emotional sickness:*** Sickness becomes emotional when the human person comes under the control of self indulgent passions like anger, hatred, bitterness, envy etc. These are emotions that ought to be mastered but when they are not, lead to the lowest ebb of human savagery.
- ***Spiritual sickness:*** In the spiritual realm, sin is the worst of all sicknesses, It is worse than cancer and all other physical ailments put together. Only God can heal spiritual sicknesses through forgiveness preceded by the sinner's repentance and a firm purpose of amendment. Just like spiritual death makes it impossible for a soul to see God; spiritual sickness is the first step towards such death. True repentance, confession of sins and the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.
- ***Mental sickness.*** This can result from a troubled psyche. It could be congenital, or as a result of accident, gradual degeneration or psychological challenges like psychosis and neurosis, bipolar disorder.
- ***Demonic Affliction:*** This has to do with sicknesses caused by a demon. It could assume the dimension of a physiological ailment or emotional imbalance. It could equally manifest as a spiritual or mental problem since it is a manipulation by a higher, malignant spirit. It may manifest as obsession, oppression or a full blown case of possession which must require a special prayer of expulsion called exorcism.



Songs and Healing

If music can heal, then the role of songs, singing, dancing and the playing of musical instruments must remain indispensable. This experience is more or less a cultural universal. People sing to let out different emotions and experience very personal and sometimes group benefits, peace, calm, unity, bond, common sense of purpose, good health of mind and body. These come in various shades as miracles of sounds.

One of those interested in songs and healing is Wolfgang Bossinger (2012) who has done so much to show the therapeutic essence of the musical. He believes that every culture has used music for healing, for rituals and other spiritual ceremonies. When people sing together especially short repetitive lines, phrases, prayers or mere sounds and do so effortlessly from the heart, they create what is called a “field of resonance” akin to a magnetic field energy which can be channeled into almost any benefit. Some of those benefits have been shown to be physical, psychological spiritual and social. (www.healing-power-of-music.com).

Physical benefits of singing:

- Singing has been proved to strengthen the human immune system by raising the level of immunoglobulin which protects humans against pathogenic organisms
- It reduces stress hormones (cortisol and adrenaline).
- It produces a mix of happiness hormones in human brain like oxytocin, serotonin, beta-endorphine and dopamine.
- It strengthens the heart and the circulation system.
- It exercises the lungs and makes breathing easier

Psychological benefits of singing:

- It strengthens self trust and self love
- It helps to express and regulate emotions.
- It creates happiness and psychosomatic wellbeing
- It is an antidepressant



- It creates identity and speaks messages to its listeners which influence life, character and attitudes
- It has no side effects.

Spiritual benefits of singing

Of all created instruments, none is more powerful than the human voice and when people sing together, they create choreograph and synchrony – doing things together. Thus, they dance, gesticulate, breathe, open and close their mouths, wave and are engrossed all at once. This creates a ‘field of resonance’. It is magnetic and indeed a source of energy which flows into hearts, soul and spirit of the group and individuals with various results. It could be chills, happiness, fullness, and awareness of the supernatural, experience of the divine or the awe of a tremendous, hidden God made immanent. At that level, music becomes a mantra imbued with explosive energy. Here, we locate the essence of liturgical music and the prerogative of active participation.

Social benefits of singing

- It brings people and hearts together
- It builds and sustains bonds
- It relieves boredom and depression

Another scholar who has learnt the healing power of music is Nestor Kornblum who has worked with Tibetan monks at the Gaden Shartse Monastery in 2000 and the Xhosa Woman’s Ensemble in Capetown in 1999. He links every sound to the creative agent of the universe, the word which appears in John’s Gospel “in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God” (Jn 1: 1).. This is resonated in the Hindu word AUM or OM which is the creative agent of the universe.

Apart from the works of Bossinger amply adopted above, Sandy Simpson did a study on Biblical Divine Healing versus other types of healing. She identifies five types of healing:

- Biblical divine healing: this is immediate when it takes place. The healing lasts. It is verifiable.



- Natural healing: this is slow and may or may not last. It follows the laws of God put in place for all created order. It is equally verifiable.
- Medicinal/medical healing: this comes through human knowledge of plants and herbs. It is a slow process. It is ultimately from God but often and erroneously attributed to the medicine man.
- Psychological healing: It comes through the power of positive thinking. For Simpson, this “emotional manipulation to get people to the point where their body excretes pain reducing chemicals is outright hypnosis. This is another trick in the “faith healer’s” bag of tricks. People are brainwashed and put into an altered state of consciousness by loud repetitious music, repetition of key phrases, group dynamics and reinforcement techniques and other cultic practices. Finally, they end up in a type of trance state where they suspend their cognitive faculties in favour of a pure emotional experience. This can lead to delusions of healing and visions that are not real. Hypnosis has ties to paranormal/demonic healing that cannot be ignored. This type of healing is hard to verify and the glory is never directed to God but to man”.
- Paranormal/demonic healing: This is as old as creation itself. It is called a lying wonder and it opens the door to demonic influence, demonization and eventual possession. A lying wonder is not necessarily a false wonder or false miracle, but it is more importantly, a miracle claimed to be from God but whose source is really from the devil. Actual healing can take place in a lying wonder but takes in the person under bondage like a fish swallowing a bait which is its natural food but covers its killer.

How Music Heals

It must be pointed out that while maintaining the thesis of this investigation, that music can heal, it does not mean that music is a substitute for medicines and hospitals. This does not even come into the purview. The sicknesses, ailments, and ills that besiege humanity are uncountable. The healing that music provides must be understood in terms of relative contexts. In the church,



music like ‘It is well with my soul’ or ‘Amazing Grace’ can speak more therapeutically to a wounded or grieving soul than all the sedative drugs available. But of course the conditions to realize the full benefits from the power of music ought to be fulfilled. By this is meant that music’s power to heal does not include bad singing. The flip side is equally true. In traditional Igbo funerals, music used can range from the sober to the noisy and riotous. In such a sea of commotion and accompanying dance and drama, it provides rare moments of entertainment, laughter and relaxation even for the family members who may have had tearful eyes earlier. Such funeral music provides mourners with a psycho-social healing which in itself is a coping mechanism. It is, therefore, not surprising to see the grieving family anticipating the arrival of different music and dance troupes. Music, therefore, can calm the mind by acting as a stabilizing force.

According to William Forde Thompson and Gottfried Schlaug in the article on “Scientific American” (volume 26, issue 2), music can heal the brain. And they illustrated it with the story of Laurel, an eleven year old that had a stroke caused by a sudden blockage in a key blood vessel to the brain. The stroke affected the part of the brain responsible for language and speech. She lost her speech but found out she could still sing. Using a treatment called melodic intonation therapy, Laurel was able to bypass the speech pathways on the left brain by tapping into the undamaged brain regions that link tones and rhythms to speech.

Coming closer home, a priest of the Diocese of Awka, Rev Jude Egbeji is well known to stutter with words while he speaks. But when he sings, it becomes a different ball game. He is one of the best tenors in the Onitsha province. He is a consummate composer of liturgical music and a great lover of singing. The surprise is always, why he does not stutter when he sings. This is because music has a different pathway from speech.

Still within the context of the religious, music has proved to be a sine qua non for various congregations. In Judaism, the mystic chanting of the psalms and the sound of the traditional Jewish horn (Shofar) have had a resounding and tremendous peace effect on the people. The Muslim call to prayers has in itself a naturally solemn nature that speaks of higher summons and



dispositions that conjure up images of an encounter. In the Christian church, the role of music is even more pronounced and diverse. The liturgies, crusades, conventions and especially the healing ministries and adorations are very huge musical celebrations from which verified and unverified healings of sorts have been claimed and reported. This has become very widespread among different Christian sects and denominations. The experience induced by the music therapist is easily achieved through music among different Christian groups. But the way an individual responds to the musical varies from person to person. For some, all that is required to alter the psycho-spiritual and emotional states may just be good instrumentations or simply put rhythm. It may be the text of the song woven in a wonderful melody. It may be the harmonious blend of voices or all these put together. This thrill is not felt equally by all. And it is justifiably so. In the natural sciences, one plus one will always be two. But in the arts, the situation is totally different. A piece of music or a painting, drama, comedy, dance all speak differently to the audience or hearers. People respond differently to arts. It is in the response of individuals that we can locate the effects of music on people. The motions of the soul that are activated by music have no hindrance in the causal relationships which emanate there from. At the sound of certain songs, instruments, emotions of joy, sadness, tears and even ecstasy have been experienced. These in their very nature are capable of healing from the root. The thrust of this paper is more on the side of psycho-spiritual, emotional and moral healing than the physical. The story of the man from Umannachi is an example of what can be attributed if not in whole, in part to the power of music.

It was in the year 2001. It was two years after the author began a classical music programmed on MINAJ Radio, 89.4 F.M Obosi in Anambra state. It was a well known and anticipated programme, a one hour of "Music of the Masters" as it was called. It featured medieval, renaissance, baroque, classical, romantic, post-romantic and contemporary musical works and history. The programme always hit the airwaves at 1 pm every Sunday. But one Monday morning, this man from Umannachi went to the radio house looking for the presenter. He was told to go back to Awka where he searched for hours before he found the presenter. His story was simple but moving. He had suffered great injustice and torture, wrongful imprisonment at



the hands of the NDLEA who broke him psychologically and left him helpless and hopeless. I do not intend to delve into the legal dimensions of the story but suffice it to mention that he went into depression. So bad was his case that the sight of his wife and children infuriated him that he contemplated multiple homicides on many occasions. And that Sunday, he nearly snapped. He wanted to end the mental disorder which had deprived him of night sleep for three weeks. He was losing it. He went into his room, locked it and prepared to take his life. And by some marriage of fate and design, a radio was on the table, and “Music of the Masters” was on. It captured his attention since the presenter was reflecting on the words of Jesus in Matthew 11: 28 “come to me all you who labour and are over burdened and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your soul. Yes, my yoke is easy, my burden, light”. And according to this man from Umunnachi, after that, “a type of music, I never heard, started; and I slept off”. He said he woke up about six hours later, smiling to himself and the thought of suicide gone. So, he decided to look for the presenter of that programme to say thanks. No doubt, the biblical exhortation may have contributed to the disposition which made it possible for the music to sweep him off. The inestimable role of music must be duly appreciated. The wonderful music was the ‘Ave Maria’ by Schubert. What did music heal in the man? Was it the thought of suicide? And more than that, he was able to sleep for the first time in three weeks. The root of the suicidal thought was the depression that set the impending disaster rolling. Indeed, music can heal. The fact is that there is a preponderance of experiences linking music to healings more than there are scientific proofs linking music to actual healing.

Conclusion

The major components of music, sound, rhythm, tempo, duration, dynamics, melody and harmony all combine to give music the type of edge and power it wields in the universes of its operation. There is no doubt that music has power. What its power accomplishes depends on the environment, energy level, dispositions and the elements at play. Music has been shown to move people to various actions, provoke certain feelings and ultimately make people feel good or well.



This was not intended to be a discourse in music therapy but there is no way it can be left out entirely in a discussion of this nature. The tenor of the argument here is simply this: that music can and does indeed heal and this is not limited to any particular musical tradition or genre. It is in the intrinsic nature of music to heal the human soul by touching the human heart. This is not a discovery of the present age. It has been in the knowledge deposit of every age and has always been taken for granted since it remained for the whole of humanity ‘truth needing no proof’. Proof in this sense refers to the establishment of a causal relationship between music and a healing experience which as a fact speaks for itself. The major religions and some sects have tapped into this most ancient of arts drawing from its immeasurable powers the countless benefits which have kept its charm and seductive character all through human history.

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