

# Universal Vibration: Exploring the Link Between Music and One's Life Process

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This article bridges the gap between music therapy and psychotherapy encouraging an art form that transcends cultural boundaries into revealing people's hidden depths.

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Music is an entity we all have some kind of relationship with, no matter what class, religion or culture we come from. From the simple drumming of a child's toy against a table to the i-Pod generation on their way to work, their white earphones testimony to sounds they have recently downloaded; we all have a connection to music and its vibration. But what does music truly say about us? What is its effect on us? Is our relationship to music merely conscious or is it unconscious as well? And how does music shape who we are in the world? With music being one of the few art forms not really comprehended within the world of psychotherapy (outside of Music Therapy) my recent research attempts to answer these questions, and others, from a Transpersonal perspective.

## **Cultural relevance of music**

As Storr (1992) points out, 'No culture so far discovered lacks music. Making music appears to be one of the fundamental activities of mankind; as characteristically human as drawing and painting' (p.1). This is a perfect statement with which to begin my quest in understanding the universality of music, and has led me to consider just how many are the ways in which we might have used this form of expression throughout the history of humanity.

One of the most interesting ideas I discovered through my research involved that of considering music as a means of communication predating actual literacy. Broadber and Greene (1981) stated that 'In 17th and 18th Century Africa, as well as Anglo-Saxon England, the song was of high functional value, literacy and the press being virtually non-existent. Dispersed Africans, given similar conditions in the new world, and given as well the new and urgent need to

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communicate from day to day in public places without being understood by the enemy, continued to use this form of communication' (p.3).

Occasionally though, the ruling classes within these societies were wise enough to understand the possible implications of music educating the masses, and were often moved to attempts to control the types of music played or listened to. As Jones (1994) suggests; 'Music acts directly on the soul. Disordered music leads to disordered lives, which leads to disorder in the state. Plato, sensing the importance of order in the soul, banned the playing of certain modes in his ideal republic in the certainty that the disorder this music introduced into the soul would soon put the state in jeopardy of insurrection' (p.19).

Music also has the ability to underline the cultural differences within the world. Meyer (1956) presents an example of this with regard to our attitudes towards mortality; 'In the west, for example, death is usually depicted by slow tempi and low ranges, while in certain African tribes it is portrayed by frenzied musical activity, yet this results in differences in attitudes towards death rather than the differences in the associative process of the human mind' (p.258).

### **Spiritual relevance of music**

Music has always contained a spiritual element within it. Jones (1994) suggested a reason for this need to have music when he stated; 'The church fathers were forced to employ a musical vocabulary when attempting to talk about love and the world order based on love, not because they lacked a more 'scientific' way of talking about these things, but because underlying this they perceived the universe was essentially musical in nature' (p.17).

The link between music and the spiritual is not just limited to European cultures. In many different religions, music has been, and is still very much, used as an accompaniment to religious celebrations, and in fact plays an essential part in them. Alongside this, music is often utilised within group or governmental ceremonies.

An excellent example of this is presented by Broadber and Greene (1981), who state that 'A major tenet of faith common to all Rastafarian sects is that a theocratic world government is the next phase of social and political evolution. This prediction arises out of meditation and an examination of the Bible. One of the characteristics of this government as outlined, is that the "singer as well as the players of instruments shall be there (Psalm 37 Vs 7)". In more than half their songs, therefore, the singer is likely to be consciously discharging what he considers to be a socio-religious responsibility' (p.13).

This suggests a considerable importance to the role of music in both the sociological and religious lives of any type of group. But, given its extraordinary ability to move us, especially spiritually, is music a gift from God, or is it more than that? As I tried to ascertain just what it might be that pulled me towards it, I started to come across ideas suggesting just what the actual nature of music might be, and therefore why we might need it to such a high degree.

Inayat Khan (1991) stated that 'What makes us feel drawn to music is that

our whole being is music: our mind, our body, the nature in which we live, the nature that has made us, all that is beneath and around us—it is all music' (p.12). This view elevates music to the level where it is more than just a means of relating to each other; it suggests a far deeper relevance to music.

In researching this, I came across a number of possible meanings, but perhaps the most succinct of these came from Jones (1994), who states that 'According to both the ancients and their Christian followers, the order of creation was love, bound together in a unity both mathematical and musical. Indeed, Love, Divine Order, Music and Mathematics are simply four different ways of saying the same thing' (p.17).

### **Philosophy and music**

Inayat Khan (1991) states, 'When one looks at the cosmos, the movements of the stars and planets, the laws of vibration and rhythm—all perfect and unchanging—it shows that the cosmic system is working by the law of music, the law of harmony' (p.13). This seems to be both spiritual and philosophical in its viewpoint, thereby emphasising the close links between these two sections.

It is Schopenhauer (1995) though, who has perhaps had the greatest influence on understanding the power of music from a philosophical perspective. In his book he says of music that, 'Its intimitative relationship to the world must be very deep, infinitely true, and really striking, for it is instantly understood by everyone' (p.163).

Storr (1992) was often critical of some of the ideas presented within Schopenhauer's work. For example, he held the view that 'music can hardly be regarded as the immediate objectification and copy of the inner life or Will which Schopenhauer claimed it to be. Music by employing sounds not found in nature, and which are arranged in extremely complex ways, may certainly be expressing the inner life in metaphorical fashion; but its composition requires as much conceptual thought as poetry' (p.145/6).

Yet, to emphasise again just how much we are connected to this entity called music, Jones (1994) states that, 'Each creature, wrote Goethe, in a letter dated November 17<sup>th</sup> 1789, is nothing more than a sound, a shading of a great harmony, which one must study in its magnitude and entirety' (p.16).

Goethe, Schopenhauer and Inayat Khan all suggest that music is so much greater an 'entity' than we realise, with each of them, in my view, going so far as presenting the idea that within music is the Word of God itself.

And as Schopenhauer (1995) states about music, 'It stands alone, detached from all the other arts. In it we do not recognise the imitation or reproduction of any Idea of the creatures of this world. Yet it is such a great and glorious art, its effect on man's innermost nature is so powerful, and it is so completely and so deeply understood by him in his inmost consciousness as a perfectly universal language whose clarity surpasses even that of the perceptible world itself' (p.162).

### **Psychotherapy and music**

With its aim of utilising the creation of music as a means of motivating patients to push beyond their various illnesses or disabilities, Music Therapy has established itself as a means of providing and encouraging expression in those least likely to be able.

Oliver Sachs regards Music Therapy as a tool of great power in neurological disorders—Parkinson's and Alzheimer's—because of a potential capacity to reorder cerebral function.

Another excellent example from the web states that 'Through musical involvement in the therapeutic context, clients' abilities are strengthened and transferred to other areas of their lives. Music therapy also provides avenues for communication that can be helpful to those who find it difficult to express themselves in words'.

But what about the rest of the music out there in the world? How do our clients relate to music? Why do they choose the music they do? Nettleton (2004) talks about the lack of writing around music and therapy stating that 'compared with the literary and visual arts, music has been treated by psychoanalysis as a poor relation. Freud undoubtedly gave the lead in this, and his frequent assertions that he had neither ability nor interest in music seem to be borne out of the fact that, although his collected works contained a number of references to composers and to individual musical works, he refers very rarely to the phenomenon of music per se' (p.5).

There have though been attempts to create this link. In one of the few statements available, Nettleton (2004) also talks of a client of Melanie Klein who developed a love of music; something Klein interpreted 'in terms of the sublimation of masturbation fantasies and of the bringing into consciousness of a fixation to the sound of parental intercourse heard in infancy' (p.7). This very much relates music to the sexual drive of humans.

Moving on from this, Reik (1953) states that the 'Musical associations occurring to us are rarely connected with well-formulated thoughts, but with ideas in statu nascendi, with thought-embryos or vague images' (p.91). This also suggests that music relates to us internally from a preverbal stage of development. Nettleton (2004) agrees with this, stating that, 'before he has acquired verbal understanding, the infant responds sensitively to changes of mood in the mother as they are transmitted via the tone of her voice through the components of pure sound—intensity, pitch, rhythm and timbre' (p.12). This view flows back to the idea that music predates literacy on a social and developmental level.

This ability to sense the change of the mood of another through sound, in my view, offers us the ability to control our environment accordingly. Storr (1992) suggests that 'instead of being threatened by an overload of incoherent auditory stimuli, we learn by means of music to impose our will upon this input, to exclude the irrelevant, to pay attention to what is important, and thus to create or discover some order in the world' (p.107).

Stone (2004) provides, I feel, a more direct connection between music and

psychotherapy when he states 'it would appear that one of music's functions is to link, to connect those who are involved in it, performing or listening' (p.23). This quote ties in directly with those of both Schopenhauer (1995) and Inayat Khan (1991) in the previous section; so what if the only way to access the true self is through music? I think this is its true purpose.

### **The music artist**

Although I have utilised the words of various performers throughout this review, my sense is that the intention of the artist, their motivation if you will, needs to be reviewed here in order that one might establish a vision of just what music in all its diverse forms might mean to them as well.

Storr (1972) made the statement that 'there can be no doubt that many artists, and many scientists too, disappointed in personal relationships, find in their work, a meaning and a value which more ordinary people only find in human relationships' (p.83).

The words of rock music artist Alanis Morissette (2004) perhaps underline what Storr is suggesting when she says 'I felt I was misunderstood during *Jagged Little Pill*. The writing of those songs was a way for me to have an outlet for my rage, so I wouldn't turn it in on myself or project it onto other people' (p.23).

Stipe (2004) speaks of the other side to the musical alliance; that involving the listener, when he says 'once it's out there, it's for everyone to interpret in a way that means something to them, and whatever they're going through' (p.58). It's as if there is a deeper emotional connection between the performer and the song, which leads directly to the equally powerful ability to move the listener, should they wish it or not.

Rap artist, Eminem, talks of the cultural importance of music in his song 'Encore' (2004) where he sings 'cos we done swam with the sharks and wrestled with alligators, spoke to a generation of angry teenagers, for if it wasn't for rap to bridge the gap would have grown to be racist, who may have never got to see our faces, graced the cover of Rolling Stone pages, broke down barriers of language and races.' Through this song he relates the work music does in bringing, perhaps alienated, groups of young people together on a cultural level, which again takes us back to the issues raised in the second section of this review.

Perhaps though, I will leave the final word to Daniel Barenboim, the Music Director of the Staatskapelle Orchestra in Berlin (2004), who calmly states that 'through music we can learn everything about our humanity' (p.54).

### **Music and our life process**

#### *Music as an entity*

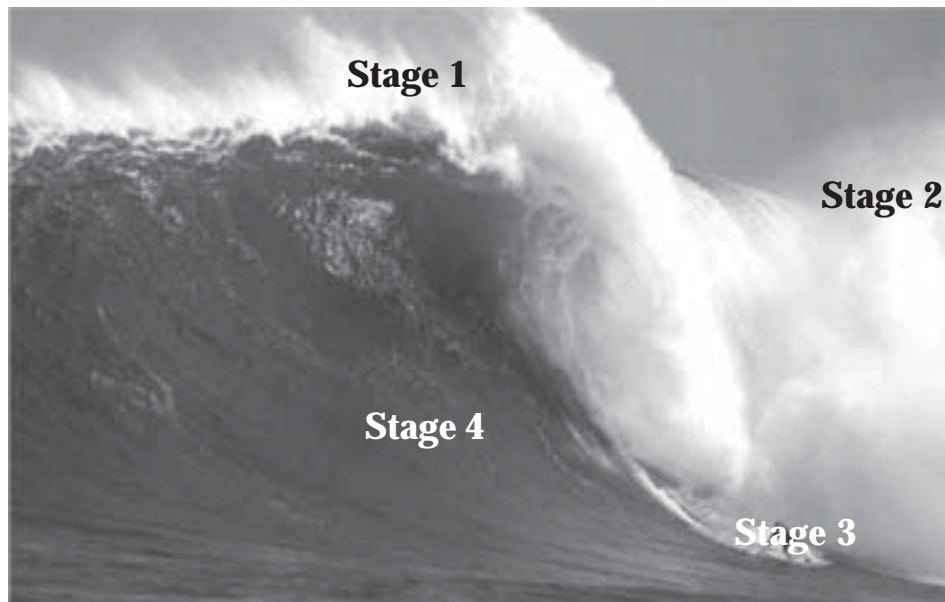
As I pondered the question of how music develops and how it seems to accompany us on each stage of our life. I came up with the idea of seeing music in a waveform, as something which has immense power yet not without the ability to regenerate itself over and over. Figure 1, below, presents this image of music as I see it.

It is important to note the four stages of the musical wave, from the growth of a genre and how it carries a generation with it out into the world, to its eventual collapse either under its own weight, or through burnout, to its movement to a position where it starts to underpin the next wave following on behind it, before its final position where it takes on a more 'legendary' status.

The same could also be said for music artists in the main, although the ones who have endured any type of longevity are those who have learnt to adapt to the changing face of music and have therefore managed to ride more than one wave.

Not noted on the diagram, but of importance, is the ability of any genre of music to influence other types of music and therefore cultures. This would take place between the first and second stages, at a time when its power is at its height and there is a natural diffusion of the musical type before it begins an inevitable decline.

This merging of music is very important for our cultural and spiritual coming together. I would argue that the more waveforms we see within music, the more coming together of types of music we will see, and the greater progress towards 'spiritual unity', (Wilbur, 2001) that will follow this.



**Stage 1:** Musical Revolution—Emergence of the musical genre carried by the emergent teenage group attached to it culturally

**Stage 2:** Musical Revolutionary Collapse—The genre loses much of its power and is surpassed by the generation following

**Stage 3:** Musical Settling—The genre finds its place within the musical depths and takes on a more 'legendary' role rather than a revolutionary one

**Stage 4:** Musical Foundation—The genre underpins new styles of music within the particular culture

**Figure 1: Musical wave**

It is also very important to note the relationship between the composer and the listener when it comes to music. Often, the writer of a piece of music creates with a particular story, or metaphor, in mind. Once this song is released into the wider domain the listener then has a choice to relate to the song either as they believe the writer intended it, or in a totally different fashion created by their own lived experience.

This second option makes the listener more active in their role of relating to a piece of music, with any new symbolism projected onto the song by the listener creating an indirect bond between them and the creator which may last only one song, or might last a whole generation.

Essentially, this is about the relationship between the musician and the audience; it's about connecting, with music being the agent for the creation of that link, and a good artist is one that is able to create this bond with many. It is important to note that at no time is this *Musical Alliance* ever complete. It is always growing, always moving, always changing, making music a change agent creating unity.

### **Music and human development**

Through my work with music I believe I have developed a means of observing clients through an exploration of their connection to music. It is evident that music is very much an accompaniment to our journey through life, in fact I would go as far as to suggest that music provides a soundtrack to the different personal 'movies' of our existence.

Humanity has always created music as a means of reflecting all that is around it, and yet I believe it offers us an opportunity to do more than just accompany us through life. I believe that a strong connection to music helps one to truly grow and individuate in its fullest sense, and that it is possible to map the stages of our development through the types of music we listen to at the different times in lives.

The first idea I should point out is that these stages are not age directed, but they are defined. One can see the process of development involved with music, from the first stage, where music and vibration are important to a newborn (and possibly unborn) baby and developing child, moving on as the child grows and learns about its environment, both the dangers and the pleasures.

During the second stage the child bonds with the family; it develops an attachment to its own specific cultural music which surrounds it, supporting it as it develops a greater sense of individuality.

But the third stage is hugely important, I feel, to the growth of a person. At some point any child has to break away from the parental ties, and at the same time from the particular musical type within that cultural or social setting. When this happens the child is most likely to be influenced by the music which is then at the height of its cultural wave (as per Figure 1), and it will be this music that will be chosen to act as an accompaniment to increasing social peer connection and development whilst lessening the parental connection.

Moving on to the fourth stage; what takes place is very interesting as the child, now developed into early adulthood, becomes increasingly able to access other types of music outside its own cultural boundary and to take the first tentative steps into a wider connection to music, self, others and the culture. I feel that this stage is perhaps an even greater challenge than Stage 3 as one is faced with the increasing desire to be oneself; to experience one's likes and dislikes without the guiding hand of friends and family. This is an important stage, and I sense that a great many people remain at this stage, settling and investigating further their own musical tastes from a cultural perspective predominantly, yet with occasional choices outside. Often, with the fixing of ones self musically within this stage and with the advancement of age, the music itself takes on a different role, changing itself from being challenging and becoming more reminiscent in nature. And one may also delve into the more spiritual side of music, whilst at the same time rediscovering this part of oneself, though I suspect one would do so within one's own 'parent' culture and rarely from outside.

Should we move on to the fifth stage, thereby daring to embrace other types of music sometimes totally removed from our original starting space, we have the chance to truly begin the sideways movement of individuation into a fuller human being, and to progress into the sixth stage of musical development.

What I mean by this is that individuation is often presented as a process which involves becoming all one should be, from an inward to outward standpoint, or straight up and down as I see it. I believe that as a compliment to this non-linear concept of continued human growth, there is also a process of moving outwards across the world, to the left and to the right, taking in other cultures and thereby enriching ourselves as we progress, and music offers us the most accessible means of doing this.

In the West, we are constantly encouraged to recreate ourselves culturally, to embrace the latest trend, yet it is often forgotten that this change is accompanied musically. It should follow that a person who has broken through the cultural barrier, who is developing a greater awareness of their own process and beginning to eschew the influence of their peers, is better positioned to embrace the music of other cultures of their choice.

### **Music and therapy**

As presented above, the musical history gives me, as a therapist, the opportunity to consider the non-linear 'age' of a client based upon their choice of music. But how do we use this in practice?

There are a number of exercise which I feel are of use when working with music and our clients:

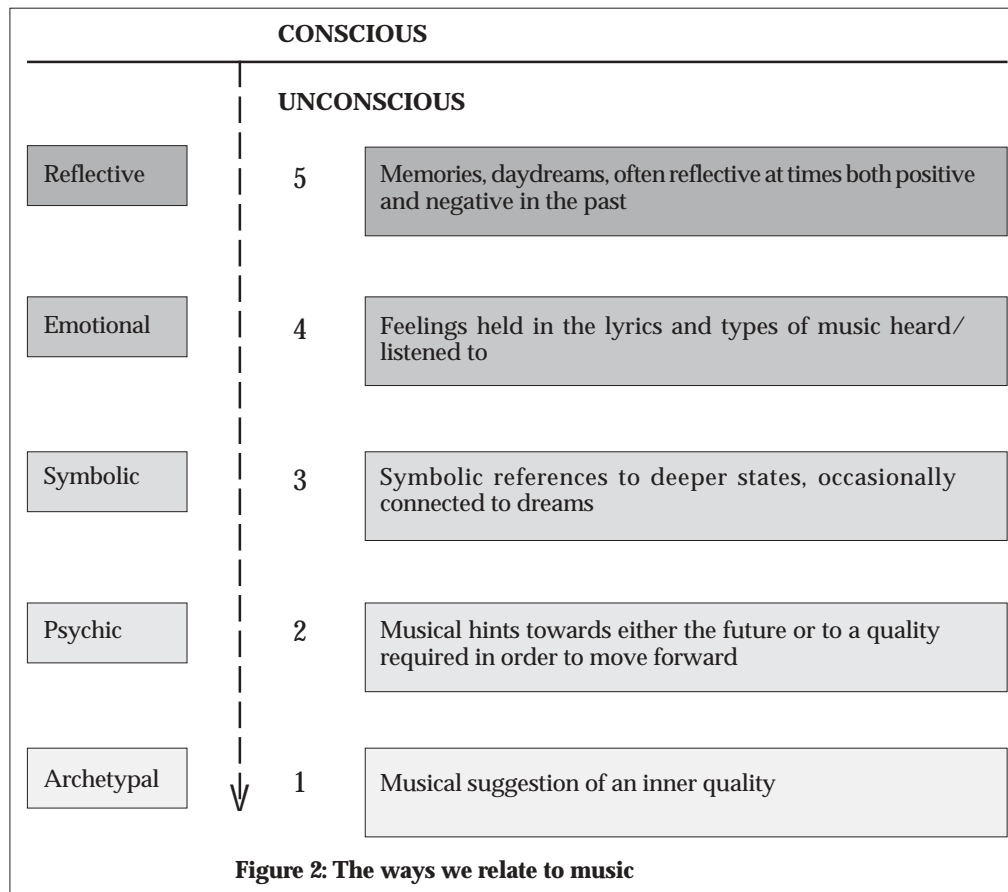
- Ask the client to complete Music Diaries for a period of a week outlining any music or songs that they heard or played together with the reasons for their choices

- Ask the client to talk about their own personal musical history
- Ask the client to play two pieces of music and discuss why they chose them, together with any memories or feelings attached to them
- Draw one particular song as chosen by the therapist (this should always be the same song for each client. I have always used Salif Kieta's (2002) song Afrika; the selection being based on my not having a particular link to this song).

The completion of the first two tasks should provide the therapist with an idea as to where the client sits in the Musical Spectrum, and therefore how advanced they are developmentally.

This is also key when considering how outward or inward focused we are. We may, for example, choose to listen to something Classical as we are in a more reflective mood, or something more Rock-based when feeling more aggressive and fiery.

With regard to the second two tasks, we all use music in different ways. Below in Figure 2, I have listed how the ways connect to music.



Some of us use music as a means of altering or reflecting our mood, others use it to help them remember key parts of their lives, good times and bad, whilst others still, relate to music in a metaphorical way. We also have a relationship, I feel, which is part predictive, or psychic, and might also be archetypal on occasion. This makes our relationship with music much more complex than first considered, but also richer with regard to the wealth of information a therapist might be able to use should they understand better the relationship between the client and music.

Asking the client to draw music is key in understanding just what part of the client is being projected outward. Understanding the relationship between the creator, the musical piece itself, and the listener is hugely important for a therapist. As an audience we often manufacture our own link with a piece of music; something often revealed through using other creative means, like drawing. But the reason for using the same song each time is that, hopefully, somewhere within each drawing there will be an element, no matter how small that might be, of just what the creator was intending to convey musically. This can be teased out, leaving just the client's material behind.

It may also be possible to use music as a means of encouraging the further development of our clients, like offering a *Musical Prescription*: to take their musical taste and encouraging its growth, and therefore the growth of the client as well; although one should only begin this process in the therapy room, allowing a safe and contained introduction to what might be a new type of music to them.

My theory is that by purposely expanding the musical repertoire of a client I am thereby inviting them to alter their vibration, while placing them indirectly in touch with a side of themselves that they might have difficulty acknowledging or developing. This, of course, should only be undertaken once one has taken a thorough musical history of a client, as only then will it be possible to consider just how a different type of music might benefit them. The therapist should, of course, be a musician.

### **Conclusions**

As Stone (2004) mentions 'we see that music appears to contain functions of healing, connecting the unconscious with the conscious, and is to do with relationships' (p.78). I would heartily concur with this point and feel it is my responsibility as a therapist to utilise this relationship as fully as I can in order that I may better assist the uncovering of the unconscious gems awaiting the client as they undertake their journey.

Stevens (1990) agrees with this, observing that 'conscious-unconscious interaction is important not only in the maintenance of mental health but also in the achievement of all creative activity, whether artistic, literary or scientific, and on it depends what Jung came to regard as the highest of all human attainments, the development of the personality, whereby an individual becomes as complete a human being as it is possible for him or her to be' (p.9).

But, as Olson (2004) states, 'music is a powerful thing, and when we understand its significance, it can bring dramatic changes both positive and negative into our lives' (p.2).

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### Endnote

A more extensive version of this paper was submitted, as part of the MA in Transpersonal Counselling and Psychotherapy, through the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Education (CCPE) and De Montfort University.