

Academic/Research Article

Living Melodies: Modes of Therapeutic Resonance

By Alex Delogu



Music is often considered a fanciful activity; a pleasant distraction from the seriousness of life. In this article, music is placed centre stage and its relevance for human attunement is explored across multiple domains.

Introduction

Music is everywhere. It plays at all times, through all cultures and has been considered by many writers to be a fundamental human trait, if not the distinguishing one (Blacking, 1973; Mithen, 2006; Sacks, 2008; Spitzer, 2021; Tomlinson, 2015). This article will review the psychoanalytic writing around music and demonstrate its importance for thinking about being human, specifically how to think about human experience through our ears. Since the topic is not

commonplace, relevant background theory will be provided, although ultimately the focus will be on psychotherapy and a number of existing therapeutic trends relating to music.

From cradle to rave

In humans, musical capacities are developed before linguistic ones. This lends some credence to the idea that music came before language with respect to the idea that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” (McGilchrist, 2010,

p. 103). That is, what comes first developmentally gives clues as to what came first on an evolutionary scale.

The prenatal sound environment is thought to be fairly quiet, although certain biological sounds and environmental sounds seem to get through (Lecaneut, 1996). This is mostly comprised of low frequency sounds from the foetus and mother, along with nearby speech and environmental sound (Lecaneut, 1996, p. 7). As the cochlea — part of the inner ear — develops after approximately 20 weeks, the onset of auditory functioning begins to take effect (Lecaneut, 1996) and three to four months before birth the foetus will be experiencing a variety of sounds. By week 36 the ear is complete and interconnected to the brain (Spitzer, 2021).

A relevant and curious evolutionary detail suggests that the small hairs in the human ear are similar to the hair cells on fish cells that detect movement in water. Human cells do not respond to pressure waves as fish do, but rather to frequency transmitted through air. In this regard, “when we say music ‘touches’ us, as when a fish feels the tactile vibrations of water, we are not speaking metaphorically at all” (Spitzer, 2021, p. 108).

Most mothers know that their babies respond to sounds and this has been demonstrated both pre- and postnatally (Lecaneut, 1996). Babies are soothed by sounds they have been exposed to before birth and while this is primarily the mother’s voice, it can

also be aeroplane sounds, music or, in one specific example, the *Neighbours* theme song (Lecanuet, 1996). Babies prefer lullabies with which they are familiar to ones with which they are unfamiliar, even when spoken by the same voice (Lecanuet, 1996), showing an awareness of linguistic patterns, not just voice. Infants of one week cry with their parents' accent (Cross, 2009) and can discriminate between the mother's actual voice and a recording of it (Spitzer, 2021, p.38). One study of mothers at home found that they all sang to their infants, even those that claimed to not have a singing voice (Mithen, 2006). "A good mother (or parent or caregiver) is a child's first music teacher" (Spitzer, 2021, p. 39). The baby exists within a "familial soundtrack that is a specific expression of the family group's psychic structure" (Grassi, 2021, p. 90).

Up until the age of three the infant becomes engaged by Infant Directed Speech (IDS) or motherese (emotional infant directed speech). This is the universal way people adopt to speak to infants and one that emphasises the musical elements of speech (Mithen, 2006). Infants are sensitive to and respond to this type of communication in which rhythm, tempo and pitch are exaggerated (Mithen, 2006). The purpose of this attentiveness is not solely for language acquisition. Three other key features are: engagement; emotional regulation; and communicating intentions (Mithen, 2006). Musical education begins at this early stage as parents intuitively 'speak' in this way, marking the earliest modes of communication (Papoušek, 1996). In tonal languages, like Chinese, where the pitch of a word changes its meaning, mothers often sacrifice the meaning of the word in favour of IDS-pitch variations (Mithen, 2006).

The manner of back-and-forth at this early stage is founded on

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improvisational exchanges, whereby exchanges between mother and infant occur not by simple repetition, but by expressive variation (Gratier & Apter-Danon, 2009). Predictable patterns of communication hold no interest for infants, whereas subtle variation provides expressive points of contact (Gratier & Apter-Danon, 2009). Strictly ordered time is not what comprises rhythm (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). This 'improvisation zone' is a space between rigid repetition and unpredictable variation, a space in which communication is possible (Gratier & Apter-Danon, 2009). The authors liken this sensitive timing to psychological 'holding' à la Winnicott (Gratier & Apter-Danon, 2009, p. 314). They also ground their definition of belonging on this somewhat stable but variable process. "Belonging requires a balance between the known and the new, repetition and creativity, structure and variation" (Gratier & Apter-Danon, 2009, p. 305). Further experiments showed that lack of variation in the voices of borderline mothers resulted in infants who vocalized less (Gratier & Apter-Danon, 2009). The author of this article suggests that inexpressive vocalisation can be likened to an auditory 'still face'.

As language takes a more prominent role, musical aspects recede into the background. "The thread between child and adult is cut when language comes along and elbows music into its niche" (Spitzer, 2021, p. 42). Let us not forget, however, that music came first and, likewise, music outlives language in

old age, as in people with dementia who are enlivened through music (Spitzer, 2021). In Buddhism they go so far as to say that the dying can be guided towards enlightenment with prayer, as they believe that hearing is the last faculty to fade (Padmasambhava, 2007).

Bodies in resonance

One view that is of great relevance to this discussion is proposed by Iain McGilchrist in his formulation of the role of each brain hemisphere. In brief, the two hemispheres process and constitute the world in vastly different ways. "Music is the primordial form of expression in the right hemisphere" (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 217). Using this background understanding, it is important to identify some of the key features of musical thinking.

Music is fundamentally about relationship or 'betweenness' (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 72). This means that the context is crucial, if not fundamental. The same note in a different contexts functions and is experienced differently. "The musical interval, which unites and separates two or more sounds, may be considered the root of human relationality" (Grassi, 2021, p. 107). To apply this to human relations and psychotherapy is to agree with Cohn when he states that the "client you meet as the therapist is the client who meets you. There is no client *as such*" (1997, p. 33). Each person we meet will draw out aspects of ourselves that may be familiar to us or not. This is not to say there is no underlying pattern (McGilchrist, 2010), but to appreciate the centrality of context. McGilchrist also notes the millisecond synchronisation of two subjects' right brains. "They really do 'resonate'" (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 202). Again, we see the accuracy of musical description.

In relation to the earlier statement about language, the importance of

tone, timbre, and pitch are crucial for carrying the emotional content of our vocal interactions. We saw earlier that vocal monotony disinterests an infant. Gilbert Rose notes the hollowness of depressed patients, which was further pronounced in near-term suicidal persons (2004).

A talk by Rébecca Kleinberger (2018) mentions research showing how we have slightly different but identifiable vocal patterns for everyone we speak with. We resonate differently when we are in different states and with different people. The importance of this can be seen by how music affects us directly, not indirectly through an act of interpretation. That is, we do not have to think about it, though we can do that too, we just feel it. “It is important to recognise that music does not *symbolise* emotional meaning, which would require that it be interpreted; it *metaphorises* it — “carries it over’ direct to our unconscious minds” (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 96).

Vocal prosody speaks to us directly without our needing to interpret anything. It is immediate, in the sense of not being mediated. This does not mean we are always intuitively correct in what we pick up, but points to the way this communication happens. We can of course be more or be less attuned to each other — this is one of the aspects of music that appears to have troubled Freud. “Some rationalistic, or perhaps analytic, turn of mind in me rebels against being moved by a thing without knowing why I am thus affected and what it is that affects me” (Freud, in Cheshire, 1996, p. 1131).

Resonance is said to pose a challenge to our “modern dichotomies of subject/object or agent/acted upon” (Nylan, 2018, p. 71). “Resonance is of course the complete opposite of the reflective, distancing mechanism of a mirror ... Where reason requires separation

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and autonomy, resonance entails adjacency, sympathy, and the collapse of the boundary between perceiver and perceived” (Erlmann, 2010, p. 9-10). In a similar manner, it moves beyond the signifier/signified distinction (Grassi, 2021).

A further aspect of music that is of relevance is that it is a process — a pure flow. There is no object that we call music that we can grasp, it is inherently ephemeral. “A song is a transitional object *par excellence*” (Sapen, 2021, p. 134). Not just songs, but music and sound itself. With this ephemerality we are confronted with the passing of time. On one hand, this brings to mind the loss and mourning of each passing moment (Grassi, 2021). On the other, we “do not regret the loss of each note of a melody as it is played: we do not regret the passing of each step in the dance” (McGilchrist, 2021, p. 935). Either way, time passes and us with it. We are not things that change, but processes that stabilise. “There is simply the continuous melody of our inner life — a melody which is going on and will go on, indivisible, from the beginning to the end of our conscious existence. Our personality is precisely that” (Bergson, 2007, p. 124).

Hearing problems

Many writers have noted, with some bewilderment, Freud's lack of interest in music (Cheshire, 1996; Nagel, 2013; Sacks, 2008; Sapen, 2012). While the nature and the degree of this distaste is often overstated and hard to evaluate retrospectively, one of the more thorough examinations shows that, at the very least, Freud was conflicted towards music

(Cheshire, 1996). The confusion instigated by this conflict is that psychoanalysis is a “talking cure”, mediated through speech and the ear, the organ that is “closest to the unconscious” (Bonnet, 2016, p. 143). The assumption here is that music, as the exemplar of auditory communication, would have played a more central role in this art.

Freud does ground some theory in musical concepts. He speaks of a *Zauderrhythmus*, or vacillating rhythm (Erlmann, 2010). This is the rhythm between the conscious and unconscious mind, one that both structures our perception of time and allows us to “step back from the urge to respond to each and every stimulus” (Erlmann, 2010, p. 273). Some biographical remarks show Freud thinking often in auditory terms, thus being described as an *auditif* (Cheshire, 1996). We hear also of Freud likening the analyst to a musician who “plays upon the psyche of the patient” (Cheshire, 1996, p. 1135). The examples are too numerous to recount here, suffice to say it is not as simple as Freud not liking music.

Freud's resistance to musical ideas appears in a number of ways. He describes himself as “tone deaf”, as being “a completely unmusical person”, and as being subject to an atrophy of his musical sensibilities (Cheshire, 1996, p. 1131-1132). This final example appears in reference to a biographical account about a book he was reading by his near contemporary Theodor Lipps (Cheshire, 1996; Barale & Minazzi, 2008). While Freud admired Lipps' work, he stopped short on a chapter dedicated to the relationship of sounds — a chapter in which sound was given primary status in the functioning of the psyche (Barale & Minazzi, 2008). Freud leaves this line of thought unexplored because of his own perceived lack of musical affinity. This is one of various reasons why music appears

only marginally in psychoanalysis. The authors state that “sound and music did indeed have no place in the model of the mind developed by Freud” (Barale & Minazzi, 2008, p. 939). Psychoanalysis was primarily interested in representational thought, primarily through language. This is precisely what music lacks. As we have seen, music does not represent anything.

One author names this non-representational aspect of music, or what he terms semantic indeterminacy, as “floating intentionality” (Cross, 2015, p. 23). This he argues gives music a signifying flexibility, “allowing multiple constructions of meaning” (Tomlinson, 2015, p. 276). There is an uncanny resonance here with Freud’s “free-floating attention”. The author of this article suggests that free-floating attention, despite Freud’s difficulty with music, is a deeply musical way of attending. To put it another way, one requires free-floating attention in order to attend to floating intention. The formal connection is made here by Bollas: “If we submit to the unconscious communications then we will be carried off by the many different systems of unconscious expression like those one finds in listening to music” (2007, p. 49). Here, the analyst listens and drifts along with the unconscious, not playing it as in Freud’s analogy, but playing with it.

Musical unconscious

Various analysts attempted to reintroduce the language of music into psychoanalysis. Writers also used musical metaphors in an attempt to explain a point or they applied analysis to music. Here, however, we are looking at writers who ground their ideas on musical concepts or metaphors. I am following Grassi in her prescription that “we do not need to apply psychoanalysis to music, but music to psychoanalysis” (2021,

One early view of the mind was the hydraulic view. Here, the mind is viewed as a closed system of forces, typically that of ego, id, and superego

p. 37). She also offers the idea of a “musical unconscious that coincides with the origin of the unconscious psyche” (2021, p. 101). This kind of unconscious is like a sonic memory, formed through all those resonant experiences described earlier — the lullabies, caregiver exchanges, and the sound world.

The main exponent of the centrality of a musical mind is Steven Knoblauch. In his book *The musical edge of therapeutic dialogue* he uses the jazz band as a model for understanding the therapeutic relationship. He provides numerous examples of interacting at an embodied level, with a focus on rhythm and prosody. There is an increased focus on *how* something is said rather than on *what* is being said (2010, p. 98). The move here is from the representational content of speech towards the quality of the interaction process.

The move here to a resonant relationship is captured in his notion of resonant minding (Knoblauch, 2010). A brief outline of the significance of this shift is as follows. One early view of the mind was the hydraulic view. Here, the mind is viewed as a closed system of forces, typically that of ego, id, and superego. These interact in various ways, with certain interactions resulting in psychopathology. This view of an enclosed space of forces allows, theoretically, an objective view of someone’s mind (Knoblauch, 2010). This idea was later expanded into the plastic model of mind. This model is characterised by

a multiplicity of inner objects and relationships between these objects. The plastic model is still largely closed but has the capacity to open itself to the outside. New object relations can be formed, thereby changing the inner structural arrangement. Knoblauch summarises the factor for change in each: “In the hydraulic model transference of energy is the mutative activity. In the plastic model, reorganization of the structures and the relationships between them is the mutative activity” (2010, p. 93).

To overcome this gap between closed systems, Knoblauch suggests a resonant model of the mind. This account opens up the mind to the outside. It is a truly “interpsychic psychology” (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 97). There is no longer a closed off space that needs to be inferred logically; our states of mind are in our behaviour, or rather, in the in-between of our meeting. “Minding is not in one’s head or that of another” (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 95). This betweenness is purely process, it is not a thing or a mental representation. Knoblauch draws our attention to the shape of this interaction as a “process contour” (2010, p. 60), the ups and downs of affective interaction by both parties. It is the analyst’s process contour, his “participation in the resonant field which accounts for the therapeutic impact” (Sapen, 2012, p. 191). Participation in the movement of the shared space is more important than an interpretation.

In contrast to the previous two models, this framework describes pathology as either “too much rigidity” or “not enough predictability” (Knoblauch, 2010, p. 96). This harkens back to the improvised mother-infant interactions outlined earlier.

The other theorist who moves towards a more resonant view of the

unconscious is Christopher Bollas. In his view of creativity he draws on writers, artists and composers (Bollas, 1999), although he does point to some unique aspects of music (Bollas, 2007). He describes therapy as getting to know the tone of the other. “It is the tone in which an individual expresses the self” (Bollas, 2007, p. 50).

Let us be clear at the outset that Bollas does “not intend for us to think of the unconscious as a symphony” (2007, p. 44). He is using it as a means of conceptualising the movement and articulation of the unconscious. However, by focusing on composition, and hence the score, the written material of a symphonic work, he misses out on the elements of live musical creation that are offered through jazz and improvisation — forms that do not rely as heavily on a score.

Bollas is suggesting ways in which the unconscious is open to the outside world. He finds that two of the models of mind developed by psychoanalysis do not offer this. The two models he is moving from are the topographical model and the structural theory. The topographical casts the mind as composed of different spaces: conscious; preconscious; and unconscious. The structural theory gives us three opposing forces of id, ego and superego (Nettleton, 2017). He finds that the problem with these two is that they do not leave room for perception, communication and creation (Nettleton, 2017, p. 12-14).

To account for these he offers the idea of the “receptive unconscious” (2007, p. 36). This receptive unconscious is open to the outside and permits communication from one unconscious to another. “Right-brain to right-brain” we might phrase it. As perceptive, it is impressed upon from the outside world in a way that is not just repressed (Nettleton, 2017, p. 12). As a form of communication, it

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is happening when the analyst tunes into the analysand through “evenly suspended attentiveness” (2007, p. 36-37). As a creative force it is what permits unconscious creative thought, much like in our dreams (Nettleton, 2017). One point of disagreement here is that terming it receptive does not go far enough in capturing the bidirectional aspect of mind in the way that Knoblauch’s resonance does. McGilchrist (2010) makes this point in describing consciousness as ‘reverberative’, over and above only being either receptive or generative.

Bollas looks for the unconscious in the movement between ideas. It is the in-between-ness, the quintessentially musical aspect, that is of importance. This is akin to the context of musical notes and the “process contour” mentioned above. “If we resist the understanding of sequences, if for example, we foreclose unconscious articulation through premature organization of material, then we will not learn to read the unconscious” (Bollas, 2007, p. 49).

Groups

In group analysis, music functions as a foundational metaphor. The example of an orchestra is used to emphasise the particular perceptual gestalt involved in experiencing the group. “If we hear an orchestra playing a piece of music, all the individual noises are produced each on one particular individual instrument; yet what we hear is the orchestra playing music” (Foulkes, 2018, p. 153). In group analysis the whole is what

is primarily attended to, not to the exclusion of the individuals, but in concert with them. On this account the individual is an abstraction from the whole, be it the group, family, or community. This is Winnicott’s notion of there being no infant as distinct from the mother writ large (1960, p. 587). This totality in flux is named the matrix. “The matrix is the “music” of the group, emerging from the creative space of the interactions between members” (Wotton, 2017, p. 107).

Since the orchestra was used as a model, there followed the idea that the facilitator was a conductor of sorts. The move here is to have the conductor as an equal element within the group, to minimise hierarchical structures from forming. The problem is that the conductor still smuggles in an element of superiority, i.e. it is the conductor that binds the group. We intuitively sense this — if we think of an orchestra without a conductor, we imagine an ensuing chaos. A harsh criticism is that it still poses a hierarchy and one that “fosters mechanical routine and passive submission” (Spitzer, 2021, p. 93). Bailey links the gradual elimination of improvisation with the rise of the orchestral conductor. “He is the living embodiment of the law, both positive and negative” (Canetti, in Bailey, 1993, p. 20).


In an effort to minimise the centrality of the conductor, there has been discussion over whether jazz proffers a better model than the orchestra (Christie, 2022). The jazz band has decentralised power even further. There is often no conductor, and everyone is afforded a freedom to improvise, to bring their own unique voice into the musical conversation. Jazz works from so called standard tunes, tunes with relatively simple forms, that everyone knows. This is the container for improvisational adventures.

The author of this article suggests that free improvisation has even less hierarchical structure — it often dispenses with a score, a written piece of music, and focuses purely on playing music with minimal pre-planning and direction (Delogu, 2021). This is not suggested in an effort of one-upmanship, but rather poses a rich practical and theoretical linkage, a new harmony. “Since improvisation is fundamentally cooperative, closer to group mind than singularity, it will exhibit entirely different characteristics, many of which will be out of step with the hierarchical, logocentric traditions of European pedagogy and its critical canons of genius” (Toop, 2016, p. 19). The role of the conductor has even taken on new

meaning within improvised music (Not Right Music, 2018).

Conclusion

This article has sought to connect the various disparate writings on psychotherapy and music and bring them into one place so that they can resonate freely together on the same pages. Musical metaphors pepper therapeutic discourse and this article emphasised that music speaks to something fundamental in us. These metaphors appear through Freud in the founding of psychoanalysis and in contemporary psychoanalytic thought, in child development, group analysis and neuroscience. The approach here has been to take these metaphors seriously, as describing real phenomena. By foregrounding

musical thought we move towards thinking in a way that more fully embraces our interconnection. 

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