

Music Speaks Us: Some Psychoanalytic Considerations on Music Therapy

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Abstract

The psychoanalytic interest in music is quite recent, if it is true that the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, has never devoted a research to music as such. Nevertheless, we think that music therapy could benefit from a proficuous dialogue with psychoanalysis. In this manuscript, using different psychoanalytical tools, we have provided a unitary interpretation of the meaning and the potentiality of music therapy, showing why music has to be considered the primordial authentic language and in which sense “music speaks us” (to paraphrase Heidegger’s famous statement: “Die Sprache spricht, nicht der Mensch”). Since ancient times it is well known that music has a therapeutic effect and power, but only recently neuroscience has confirmed the biological effects of music on human brain. Music acts as containing and structuring factor that can heal the psychological wounds of the Self and feeds and nourishes the patient himself. During the music therapy session, the patient should recover and re-discover his early and genuine relationship with music. He goes back to his infant-hood and becomes familiar again with a pre-verbal language, which is the authentic language of his Self.

Introduction

“Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well” [1].

“Language may be called the simplification of music; music is hidden within it as the soul is hidden in the body; at each step toward simplification the language has lost some of its music” [2].

“Music ... (is supposed) to speak directly to the inner world and to come from the inner world” [3].

The psychoanalytic interest in music is quite recent, if it is true that the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, has never devoted a research to music as such [4], while he has shown more interest in art and painting [5,6], in sculpture [7] or in literature [8,9]. Yet music is a complex language which has fascinated scholars for centuries, whose origin is still mysterious and little understood [10,11] and definitely music therapy would benefit a lot from a proficuous dialogue with psychoanalysis.

The Primacy of Music as Primeval Language

It is impossible to get out of our language: yet bearing in mind this crude consideration Martin Heidegger tried to do that but the very failure of his “Sein und Zeit” [12] witnesses all the limitations and the flaws of the language itself. Indeed once upon a time there was a language in which one could conceive his expressions with no contradiction. In the primeval language, if existing, logos and irrationality were not separated and this primeval language could be music [13,14]: music as unifying universal language, from the bird-songs [15,16] to the chatter of the monkeys [17], music as the DNA of languages, music as ineffable language, space and dimension [18,19].

For example, using our language, how can we speculate about silence if the fact itself of speaking or trying to speak is an offense to silence [20]? Or how can we discuss about madness if not using the logic and the categories of our language [21]? In music this is indeed possible: silence is not the destruction or the negation of language, but enhances the meaning of music [22].

Music is like a second skin, a sonorous envelope [23,24], represents a “pleasurable milieu,.. a sonorous womb, a murmuring house” [25].

Music, together with sounds and movements, represents the very first stage of psychological development [26,27].

Fetus is able to recognize music and to react to it while being in the womb, as shown by modern neuroscience [28-30]. Music is the heart-beat [31,32], is the breath (Atman means breath but also soul in Sanskrit, as well as Atmen in German). Later, music is fundamental for the development of the child, both in terms of establishing a functioning and effective dyad and of rêverie (Bion) [33].

At the very beginning music was an oceanic language, absorbing every dimension: both physical (the mechanics of the instrument, the dynamics of the voice) and psychological (the vibration of the emotions, the resonance of the feelings). Later languages like poetry and other forms of art separated from music: thus we can say that modern tongues represent a loss of the original meaning and a “simplification of music” [2].

Yet there are some languages which are more similar to music than others and there are some tongues which despite their simplifications retain the genuine meaning of music (the so-called tonal languages, like Chinese or African ones) [34].

Music as a Complex Open Language

Gabbard has been a pioneer in his work of psychoanalytically interpreting movies [35]. He showed the multi-dimensionality of a movie and this interpretation can be applied to music as well: in this case, the situation is even more complex. The first level is given by the composer: he has transferred his ideas, his own musical inner word in the piece which is now being played by the musician (second level).

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The third level is given by the listener: he is not just a passive subject, but he re-uses, parses and elaborates the music stimuli in an infinite semiosis [36-41]. This is the collective nature of music, due to its inner collective processing and due to the existence of a collective archetypal music consciousness, and in some traditional communities, this is still felt nowadays. There, music is considered as a ritual and instruments are seen like mythological archetypes: the leather of the drums is like a maternal figure [42] and preserves its magic healing power.

A Regressive Use of Music

So far we have seen the positive role of music in the development of the Self but music can have also a regressive use: adolescents with their headphones and headsets that listen compulsively to the same song closed inside their private music space. If music "is meaningful primarily through time" [42] then music in this case is the deconstruction of time, is the excess of repetition, a hammering, throbbing modern alienation [43]. If music means something because of its collective use and processing, here it has been degraded to a merely private and instrumental use.

Earphones and microphones have become prosthesis of the skin and means of torture, even if some scholars claim that this could be a way to reconstruct the original sonorous envelope [44].

Complexity of Music as a Therapy

In this manuscript, using different psychoanalytical tools, we have provided a unitary interpretation of the meaning and the potentiality of music therapy. Since ancient times it is well known that music has a therapeutic effect and power [45-49] but only recent neuroscience has confirmed the biological effects of music on human brain. Music acts as containing and structuring factor that can heal the psychological wounds of the Self and feeds and nourishes the patient himself. During the music therapy session, the patient should recover and re-discover his early and genuine relationship with music. He can go back to his infant-hood and becomes familiar again with a pre-verbal language, which is the authentic language of his Self.

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