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Is music therapy really useful for treating illnesses and disorders?

Presentation

Music has always been a part of our lives and we are constantly in touch with it: in the radio, television and in the media, in general. As a music student, I have always associated music with leisure, as a means of disconnecting from daily life, relaxing or doing something we enjoy. However, I had never been aware of the therapeutic benefits music could have on our health or life until I decided to do my research on this topic. My curiosity arose because I wanted to know how science and music could be related, as I am currently studying both fields. In fact, music has been around me since I was a little child, as I have been playing the guitar and singing for almost all my life. Moreover, doing my Research Project in English was also motivating, as I feel very comfortable with this language and it was both a challenge and a pleasure for me to search for information in English, as most of the scientific articles on the topic are written in this language. I was also motivated by the possibility of carrying out music therapy sessions by myself and to realise if my prejudices on the topic were true, or if music had no effect on patients.

Therefore, the main objective of my Research Project is to establish if music therapy can be useful to improve an illness, or if it can have benefits not only physically, but also socially or emotionally. In relation to these objectives, two hypotheses





came to my mind, which have guided my investigation: the first one is *music/music therapy can be a helpful way to improve the symptoms of a specific illness or disorder*, and the second one, *music therapy is a useful complement for medicine*. My initial point of view regarding both hypotheses was positive, as I thought that music therapy could be an effective way for patients to open themselves to a therapist, especially in an emotional way. In fact, music has lots of physical benefits on our health too, so I initially regarded music as a perfect complement to medicine because of these benefits.

Methodology

The methodology of this project has been very varied. The basic sources of information are internet websites, scientific articles on the topic, some interesting books which I have read, and presentations and notes from the Master of Music Therapy which professional music therapists have passed me. Of course, their help was extremely useful during my research process, so they are also considered an important source of information. This Research is divided into two parts: a theoretical framework and a practical part. The first one consists of getting the useful concepts in order to make a good practical part, as it is necessary to have some previous knowledge to put it into practice some time later. Therefore, I started reading some books on the topic (LUCAS ARRANZ, Miriam. *Introducción a la musicoterapia*; NORDOFF, Paul; ROBBINS, Clive. *Creative Music Therapy: A Guide to Fostering Clinical Musicianship*) to exactly know what music therapy is and to compare different definitions on the topic. Then, I decided to consult some more specific sources, such

as scientific articles, from which I learned if music therapy was legal or not, and the effects music has on our body, emotionally and physically. Moreover, I investigated the structure of a music therapy session and the role of a music therapist in it. In terms of my practical part, I wanted to get completely involved in music therapy sessions, so I attended some sessions both in Blanes and Barcelona and I experienced all the emotions and feelings patients have for them. I also interviewed professional music therapists and knowledgeable people in the field.

Body

According to AMTA (American Music Therapy Association), music therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music so as to achieve particular therapeutic goals (maintain, increase or restore health: physical or mental matters) carried out by a professional, who is a music therapist. As its own name says, a music therapist must be a good musician, but also a good therapist. That means, that he/she needs to know how to play different music genres, but he/she also needs to know how to act in every situation and to be stable, comprehensive, patient, to have sense of humour, etc. Indeed, a music therapist must take into account that every patient is different from the others, so he/she must know every person in detail. Although music therapy in Spain is a quite unknown topic, it already has an own tradition and trajectory thanks to many people who have contributed and put lots of efforts to create this profession. Its integration in hospitals is being more and more common and there are many courses and masters related to music therapy in one way or another.

As regards our relation with music, it is part of our life since we are babies until our adulthood; and during this period, many physical reactions to music can be noticed. For instance, it is said that music activates our brain like a stimulus and it is proved by some scientific research that people who have and intense relationship with music have a better lateral-thinking and creative problem-solving, as well as music makes people remember moments from their life, which can affect their emotions. On top of that, music also stimulates the secretion of chemicals, such as adrenaline, serotonin or dopamine. In terms of emotions, music directly causes real emotions on people, but depending on the listener or his/her background, the emotional reaction can be different.

In my project, I focused on music therapy in the clinical field, specifically in Parkinson's disease, as my Practical Part consisted in attending music therapy sessions in *Associació Catalana Parkinson Blanes i Comarca de la Selva*, which is an organisation which arranges different activities to patients suffering from this illness. I attended 3 sessions with the music therapist M^a Rosa Gutierrez, and another one with Carles Geli, and the results were extremely successful. The majority of patients, who

were elderly people, improved their movement and memory there, as they remember the lyrics and melody of the songs they sang every week. Many activities were done with different therapeutic goals: stimulating rhythm, vocalisation, dancing, movement, playing instruments, relaxing etc. I also had the chance to carry out a music therapy session by myself, which consisted in singing a song they knew accompanied by me playing the guitar and dancing to the rhythm of it. Some interviews were done to the music therapists and some forms were answered by the patients. I also attended music therapy sessions in ICMT in Barcelona, with the music therapists Núria Escudé and Liliya Chernoknizhnaya, but this time the patients were two 12-year-old girls suffering from Down syndrome and epileptic seizure, so I got in touch with the effect of music therapy on different diseases and ages.

Conclusions

After having worked on my whole Research Project, some conclusions have been reached. In relation to my first hypothesis, I initially thought that music therapy could be a way to improve the symptoms of a specific illness or disorder. After having investigated the physical and mental effects of music on our body proved in scientific studies, which show that music students usually have better results at school; and having understood that music therapy can be an effective emotional support for patients suffering from terminal illnesses, I continue having a positive point of view regarding this hypothesis. With reference to the second one, my initial opinion was that music should only be used as a complement to medicine, and after having made the interviews to professional music therapists, I have realised that music is only an emotional or physical plus to the illness' treatment. For instance, cancer patients need their therapies, but treatments with music can be emotionally positive for them so as to treat them in a holistic way.

I also found a scientific study which showed that patients suffering from Parkinson who attended a music therapy programme had better talking and movement skills and all of them felt emotionally better, so music can really be a way to improve the symptoms of a specific illness, but it is important to take into account the uniqueness of each patient: every patient is different, so they should be treated as unique individuals, as their emotional reactions to music are different. In conclusion, my personal experience doing the Research project was not as bad as I thought it would be. If you choose a project you like, everything is easier than you expect. Moreover, I think that getting to know music therapy has been an enjoyable experience, because it is a quite unknown topic that, in my opinion, should be known by everybody because it combines helping other people's health with music, on balance, one of the most beautiful forms of art.

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