

## Effects of Synchronizied Physio and Harp Music Therapy

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### Opinion

We usually talk about how music moves us. Being a 'concerto' of inaudible sound waves, the complicated human cerebral network of neurotransmitters associated with innumerable neurons and their connections identifies and transforms the energy from differentiated frequencies, resulting in the perception of music that indeed initiates emotions such as joy, passion, excitement, melancholy and even fury [1].

During historical periods, music has progressed enormously and today still occupies a central place in mythology, in religious systems and in various types of entertainments all over the world facilitating important spiritual manifestations. We sing or hum to make the baby fall asleep or to 'wipe away' a tear. Music is used for celebration, for grieving, for walking in line, for relaxation and enjoyment and many other purposes. The voice and musical instruments have a unique ritual and symbolic value of their own.

For more than 3,000 years, the harp has been an instrument of healing, as illustrated by the paintings of harps on ancient Egyptian temples or in ancient China, where the ch'in, a table harp instrument, was played for health, longevity and spiritual enlightenment. In Africa, the harp has had a long tradition of accompanying the troubadour (griots) who helped to bring healing to the community through music, storytelling, and connecting with the spiritual world. Pythagoras (500 BC), who lived in Samos, Greece, prescribed lyre music and diet for healing his patients. In ancient Ireland, the God Dagda was known to be able to change the physical and emotional well-being of his listeners when playing three different strains on his harp, which could bring about either sleep, tears or laughter. The ancient Celtic tradition referred to the harp as the "Doorway between the Worlds" of heaven and earth.

Music is also said to be the speech of angels, and gentle sounds from a single harp are certainly capable of transporting the listener to an elevated state of perception. The association between angels and harps apparently originates from Biblical time: the story of David, a shepherd and harpist, healing King Saul from anxiety and depression. (1 Samuel 16) and "Four angels, along with 24 elders, each hold a harp and a golden bowl full of incense to represent people's prayers as they praise Jesus Christ" (Chapter 5 of Revelation).

The harp, however, is not exclusively tied to religious conventions. Mermaids, water nymphs and sea sirens were said to attract hapless travelers to their doom by playing the harp. When Apollo's son Orpheus played the lyre it is said that his songs could charm even rocks and rivers, with oak trees pulling up their roots to follow him down the mountainside. Most famously, of course, his playing softened

the hearts of Hades and Persephone-the Gods of the underworld-who allowed his wife Eurydice to return from the dead.

Live harp music has been performed at the bedside for many years at the Danish Hospice Sjælland (16 in-patient beds) by a certified therapeutic harp practitioner (CTHP). The purpose of harp music is to create well-being for seriously ill patients and their relatives and help establishing a more meaningful and tranquil atmosphere of transition. Harp Therapy is still a rare discipline in Denmark and the CTHP is the first in this country.

The importance of music therapy in general for addressing symptoms and lowering distress among patients is well documented [2-5].

The harp differs from many other instruments and the human voice by its vibrational patterns. A harp usually has 26 to 47 strings, and when you listen to a harp on which a string is being plucked, you will immediately experience a quality of sound that is more than just a single note.

Corresponding overtones and undertones multiply the vibrations of each plucked string. This rich mix of harmonic sound bathes the body, mind and spirit of a listener with all of the vibrational energy which the sound carries.

Moreover, when you play, you usually pluck more than one string at a time. This enables the harpist to play both a melody line and harmony, and it distinguishes the harp from the human voice, flutes, brass instruments, violins and similar instruments.

Playing a melody line is a movement in time. The music moves horizontally and tells a story while it moves on note for note. In this way, it connects mostly to the personal realm and history. The harmonic part is not moving in time but is rather a vertical movement and experience that connects heaven and earth in a timeless state.

The harp therapist at Hospice Sjælland primarily uses her own compositions that especially adapt to every single circumstance that may appear in the room. Well-known music could create more tension because of potential memories that often relate to the music that we know, while unidentified music – still being very harmonious – gives a higher degree of relaxation to the patients.

Tuning-in musically and focusing on the intimate context in an end-of-life setting is important for the harp therapist in order to palliate distressing symptoms, and most patients listening to harp music respond with a feeling of tranquility and a perception of feeling free and safe with less tension and pain; and finally a peaceful acceptance of letting go. Certain musical modes may resonate differently according to the response of a given moment. Modes may change instantly by observing and addressing breathing patterns, mental distress or other

specific objective and subjective signals. The harp music then resonates gently with the rhythms of the person's own body thereby creating harmony, and may even synchronize at the cellular level. That is why live music is to preferable to recorded music, which is fixed in time.

Furthermore, many relatives often tell in a follow-up and post-mortem rendezvous at the hospice that harp music brought the dying and the family closer together, because the patient's emotional needs is one of the most difficult areas for their close relatives to deal with. Even children usually love the sounds of the harp and we have often experienced that with a little help children plucked the strings and played for their dying parent.

Physiotherapy is a very important co-factor in a palliative care setting, and it does indeed improve Quality of Life and the well-being of the patients. The physiotherapist at Hospice Sjælland also has a background in classical music, and for more than a year the combination of harp therapy and palliative physiotherapy has been synchronized at the bedside as a non-pharmacological supplement to daily palliative management of symptoms. It is interesting that this combination supports natural mechanisms such as pulse and natural breathing patterns and raises the patients' quality of life measured by the EORTC checklist. In many patients with dyspnea and anxiety, the breathing patterns are fast and thoracic, a so-called upper chest breathing. During the joint effort of the harp therapist and the

physiotherapist, the patient will achieve relaxation and a predominantly diaphragmatic breathing pattern.

Music is nonverbal and gives the patients a unique opportunity to express emotions through their perception of it. The aim of the music and the physiotherapy is to attract attention to the interaction of body and mind, and the combination of these therapies seems to have a strong synergetic effect in the management of somatic and mental distress in palliative care. Further research into this topic is highly recommended.

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