

## ***Unheard melodies: the “psychoanalytic function” of music listening in music therapy work***

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### **Abstract**

The paper focuses on the musical experience of the listening and, more specifically, the music listening in the music therapy setting. Starting from a psychoanalytic perspective on sound-music and from a psychoanalytically informed therapeutic approach, the idea of a “psychoanalytic function” of music is first proposed. This function implies that music allows the listener to *establish a relationship* with himself and his own inner world, to do *conscious and unconscious psychological work* with the evoked emotional experiences and to generate a *personal symbolic meaning*. Later, through the presentation of a receptive music therapy experience carried out during the Covid-19 emergency, the way the psychoanalytic function of music promotes processes of transformation and psychic elaboration of traumatic experiences is illustrated.

**Keywords:** psychoanalytic function, music therapy, listening, preverbal, covid-19

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter*  
(from “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, J. Keats)

*...music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
While the music lasts.*  
(from “Four Quartets”, T. S. Eliot)

### ***There is no such thing as a music: some epistemological premises***

Since ancient times, the question about the nature and the *significance* of music seems to refer to its ability to condition the human soul and to come into direct contact with the passionate and spiritual sphere of those who practice or enjoy it. The ancient Egyptians, the Chinese and the Mesopotamians attributed divine origins to it and believed that, closely related to cosmogony, the movement of celestial bodies and number theory, it exerted a huge influence on the life of men. Starting from similar conceptions, Pythagoras believed that the harmony of which music is the bearer had ethical-pedagogical implications of primary importance. For Plato and Aristotle, the art of sounds was “doctrine of *ethos*” and each *harmony* (that is, each modal scale) was able to evoke certain moods and behaviors. Aristotle also highlighted its therapeutic properties, attributing to the musical experience a function of *kàtharsis*. In the Renaissance era, it was believed that music, through the use of its four fundamental modes (dorian, phrygian, lydian, and mixolydian), had the ability to restore harmony between the four humors present in the human body (blood, phlegm,

yellow bile and black bile) and between the temperaments associated with them (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic). In different parts of the world it is still possible to recognize traces of remote cults and magical-ritual practices within which music functions as the essential healing instrument for the bite of mythical animals and spirit possessions – as in Apulian *tarantism*, Sardinian *argia* and in several African or African-derived cults (De Martino, 1961).

Starting from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, different kinds of studies have been carried out which have attempted to establish which were the sound, formal and aesthetic elements through which music evokes moods, stimulates thoughts and acquires meaning (Imberty, 1986). From a philosophical and musicological perspective, some authors have addressed the problem of the cultural conventionality of musical signs and their possible syntactic function; others investigated the stylistic techniques of *madrigalism* and sound *imitation* or *analogy* (such as in the *The Dance of Death* by Saint-Saëns or in *Peter and the Wolf* by Prokof'ev); still others highlighted the polysemic character of sound. Psychological research, on the other hand, has mostly focused on the perception and cognitive processing of forms (*gestalten*) and musical sounds. More recently, thanks to the progress made in *imaging* techniques (fMRI, TAC, PET), it has also been possible to identify the cortical and subcortical areas active during the musical experience – think, for example, of the research conducted on the relationship between music, empathy and the *mirror neuron system* (Koelsch *et al.*, 2006; Overy & Molnar-Szakacs, 2009; Zatorre *et al.*, 2007). According to these points of view (in accordance with the ancient beliefs about music), the ways the musical phenomenon affects the man should be sought in the music itself, in its formal organization (major or minor mode, consonant or dissonant intervals, tonality or atonality, etc.) or, according to a modern vision, in a predisposition of the perceptual and neurological apparatus of the human being. However, there are other studies that open the way to different perspectives, to a more focused vision on the active role of the listener and his “inner life” – a vision on which this paper bases its epistemological assumptions. According to these other perspectives, music and its meaning cannot be explained exclusively through semiological models (i.e. in terms of a system of musical signs governed by culturally shared harmonic and melodic rules), nor through cognitive and neuroscientific research. The listener would in fact risk being ‘reduced’ to a sort of receptor that at most reacts (in neurophysiological or cognitive terms) to sound stimuli, which become “significant” insofar as they activate specific areas of the brain or are assimilated to learned schemas of representation or are ‘codifiable’ by virtue of specialist knowledge and cultural belonging. In other words, the neurological, cognitive and cultural points of view do not seem to adequately take into account the listener's personality, the hermeneutic and creative (poietic) dimension of the music listening experience nor his nature of *object relation* (intended as the subject's unconscious emotional relationship with the object-music). According to the perspective taken in this work, the musical phenomenon is

subordinated to the individual's *feeling* and the internal relational dynamics that occur in listening.

The basic idea here is that music per se does not exist. It “rises” exclusively in the ear of the listener(1) – when it is played – in the form of emotional experience. In other words, I think that just as “there is no such thing as an infant” separated from a mother who takes care of him (Winnicott, 1960), *there is no such a thing as a music(2)* in the absence of someone who gives it an affective meaning. Therefore, it would be more correct to say that music *is* the feeling (or the set of feelings) that it evokes in each listener, even before an organized set of sounds and silences governed by formal rules. On the other hand, according to ethnomusicological and anthropological studies, the first musical sounds (and so the first instruments) were born from motor and melodic impulses that the first men on earth *acted out* to express the “motions of the soul” (Sachs, 1940) and, next, to establish relationships with others and with nature (Grauer, 2011; Mithen, 2006). According to this evolutionary hypothesis, it becomes clear that the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic rules underlying the music theory and practice are nothing more than a consequence - an abstraction - of that natural process by which, in origin, different sounds spontaneously repeated (rhythm), combined (melody) and overlapped (harmony) have allowed men to express, understand, communicate their emotional experiences, needs and intentions. This means that notes, scales, intervals and chords do not have any specific emotional quality or intrinsic meaning – except for “phylogenetic transmission” – but it is always the *interpretation* of who listen that makes them meaningful (that allows them to arouse emotions, thoughts and suggestions). The research conducted by Prof. Michel Imberty on the *psychological semantics* of music seems to support this view. Imberty initially used experimental psychology methods to investigate how people attach certain meanings to music (Imberty, 1986). However, he observed that this approach allowed us to understand our ways of perceiving musical works exclusively on an objective level – namely, in terms of adaptive exchanges between one's own cognitive representation schemas and the musical forms – while it is in the subjective and purely symbolic dimension that the *musical signifier* takes on a profound *signified*. Imberty notes that *symbolization* is a “subjective deformation” of external reality – it does not contemplate a “cognitive conservation of reality”. Therefore, the relationship between the work and the subject is «only a relationship of the subject with himself through the work» (Imberty, 1981, p. 29). Music, states the French scholar, is the object of a *psychic investment* that «roots the perception and understanding of the work in the unconscious» (*ibid.*) and is only through the processes of this investment that the work *exists*. Susanne Langer, through a rigorous and elaborate philosophical investigation, also highlighted the purely symbolic and subjective nature of music. For Langer the musical form “*is an unconsummated symbol*” (Langer, 1942, p. 195), an unsaturated one, which in itself does not refer to any meaning except in the encounter with a listener. Only the latter can connote the sound “text” with meaning and only in this way the *musical symbol* can be

“consumed” in an *affective symbolized*. In essence, the preliminary assumption that I intend to propose is that music is primarily constituted as a *psychic phenomenon*. In other words, it is a human experience determined by the inner world, the history, the sensitivity and the imaginative capacity of the listener, even before the physical characteristics of the sounds, the aesthetic aspects of a piece of music or the listener's degree of musical training. This means that although the constitutive elements of music (rhythm, melody and harmony) present important neurophysiological, cognitive and cultural correlates, it is above all the creative processes and the transformative function of a *mind* that allow music to *have body*.

### **A psychoanalytic perspective on sound-music**

The music listening experience then always consists of an *interpretative* process whereby the sound forms ‘embody’ something of the listener’s inner world. A relation seems to exist between the way in which the sound-music is manifested and the way in which our psychic apparatus expresses itself. However, this does not say anything about *what* is expressed. Following Susanne Langer’s thought (1942), music does not symbolically *represent* any specific content but it has the ability to *present* the “life” of feeling of who listen. That is, it reflects only «*the morphology of feeling* [namely] the rhythm and pattern of their rise and decline and intertwining» (*ibid.*, pp. 193-194)(3). This also implies that, lacking of “manifest” contents, the musical sign does not conceal any latent and removed content. «Its meaning lies in the sound», Di Benedetto wrote (2000), «neither under nor behind the sound signifier» (p. 161, my translation). Thus, on one hand music represents nothing but itself and, on the other one, it has the sole function of reflecting the *dynamic profile* – or the *forms of vitality* (Stern, 2010) – of an emotional experience. So, what do the feelings evoked during a music listening experience refer to? What is their origin? What dimension of the psychic life do they draw on? From a psychoanalytic perspective, they undoubtedly refer to a kind of “unrepressed” unconscious – where Mancina (2004) considers the *sound archives* of the Self being stored, that is, the preverbal and presymbolic elements of the experience. Indeed, music shows an *isomorphism* with the primitive functions of mind, which are manifested beyond words and secondary thought processes (Reichardt, 1987). What is “rediscovered” in music listening are the ‘traces’ of an *unthought known* (Bollas, 1987), of a pre-linguistic *originary* in which «the world expresses itself through the body, and it is the body that ‘thinks’ the world» (Gaita, 1991, p. 45, my translation). There is a partial return to ancient ways of self-perception, communication and relationship with the environment (Fornari, 1984; Anzieu, 1985; Maiello, 1995; Stern, 1985). The sense of music is then constituted where the representative capacities of the word stop (or where they have not yet developed). Through the feelings evoked and expressed in its sound forms, music allows to experience everything that is inaccessible to words, or to “pre-feel” that «*not-yet-symbolized* part of the psychic experience [...] before it reaches to be said» (Di Benedetto, 2000, p. 57, my translation). In this way, the emotions associated with



music become the first *signs* of something that yearns to become thought, the expression of a «minimal unconscious semantic» (Green, 1977, p. 152). In other words, musical forms are internally constituted as *formal signifiers* (Anzieu, 1987) namely, as specific configurations assumed by the psychic space to give chaotic and unexpected contents of the emotional experience their first symbolic form (impressions, images, metaphors, memories). Thus, listening to music becomes a *transitional experience* – on the border between body and mind, asymbolic and symbolic, internal and external – from which new meanings can emerge (created or re-created) now available for being thought or communicated. From this point of view, Di Benedetto (2000) defines the musical experience *regressive* and *progressive* at the same time. Music, in fact, «while eliding logical-verbal thinking, through the reproduction of ancient perceptual situations, it subjects the psyche to an exercise of listening, which widens its receptive sensitivity and therefore makes it progress towards a wider *feeling*» (*ibid.*, p. 197).

Therefore, psychoanalysis provides vertices of observation that highlight the potential of musical listening in “giving sound” (and even voice) to the *silent* parts of the Self. Such vertices clarify how the understanding of the musical work has its roots in the listener’s pre-representative and preverbal unconscious, as well as which ways he attributes a profound and personal meaning to music. However, although some bibliographical references about the psychoanalytic investigation of sound and music are available since the 1920s (Nass, 1989), a real use of the musical sensitivity in clinical settings can be retraced (more explicitly) only in the literature of the last twenty years. This is, most likely, due to the *paradigm shift* occurred in the psychoanalytic theory and practice in recent years – a greater interest from *contents* to *containers* (Ferro, 2006; Ogden, 2004), from an *investigative epistemology* to a *constructivist epistemology* (Di Benedetto, 2000), from an ethics of interpretation to an “aesthetics of reception” (Barale & Minazzi, 2008), from a *talking cure* to a *taking care* (Garella, 2002). Thus, the psychoanalysts seem to have become more increasingly attentive to the patients’ primary processes and needs, to the infra- and extra-verbal elements of their speeches and to the expressive forms of the *protomental*. Indeed, a *musically oriented listening* of patients in the analytical situation allowed many therapists to strain their ears towards what is «whispered between sentences and without sentences» (Reik, 1948, p. 145), to hear «the music of humanity or the little bit of it which has got into [the consulting-room]» (Bion, 1983, p. 74). Such a way of thinking focused on the musical dimension may be useful, e.g., in tracing and elaborating what happens at a preverbal and presymbolic level of the therapeutic relationship (Blum, 2016; Knoblauch, 2000). Instead, extemporaneous forms of *acoustic* and *musical rêverie*(4) may help the analytical couple in collecting «the dispersed sensory impressions of the session in a space-time flow, facilitating the organization of affects» (Lombardi, 2016, p. 130, my translation) or in forming «bridge between primal or traumatic psychic areas, essentially wordless, and other psychic areas that are expressed by conceptualization and symbolization» (Erel-

Brodsky, 2016, p. 582). In some other cases, music in the therapist's mind may bring to light counter-transferential feelings closed to the consciousness until then (Boyer, 1992; Nebbiosi, 2016). *Applying music to psychoanalysis* then means to the clinician training his/her own mental tools in «getting in touch with what cannot be said, a bit before it may be named» (Di Benedetto, 2000, p. 160, my translation). This may happen since the musical form is «the only direct presentation of the ineffable we have available to share» (Sapen, 2012, p. 132).

### **Psychoanalytically informed music therapy**

The *psychoanalytically informed music therapy* is based on the assumption that music and psychoanalysis both share the potentiality to *give place* (i.e. space-time and “figurability”) to the unspokable and unthinkable aspects of the human experience. This discipline can be defined as an (individual or group) *expressive therapy* focused on the use of sounds and music, and on the relation that the therapist and the patient establish through them. It can be applied both in properly clinical settings – as in case of psychopathologies where the relational, symbolic and linguistic skills are particularly compromised – and in (not-clinical) circumstances in which the logical-verbal thinking cannot adequately elaborate the lived experience. The techniques adopted in music therapy are conventionally categorized into *active* (when specific musical instruments are used) and *receptive* (providing a shared listening of sound-music tracks). The psychoanalytic theory provides, on one hand, the vertex from which the *therapeutic process* and the dynamics emerging in *the relational field* can be monitored; on the other hand, a set of methodological guidelines to orient the approach of intervention (especially as regards the music therapist *stance* in the session)(5). Therefore, within analytically oriented music therapy, sound-music counterparts of psychoanalytic constructs such as *transference-countertransference, resistances, holding, containing, affect attunement, rêverie, negative capability, intersubjective third, transitional objects and phenomena* have been identified and conceptualized (Bruscia, 1998; De Backer & Sutton, 2014; Hadley, 2002; Lecourt, 1993; Wigram & De Backer, 1999). Being integrated in music therapy work, the musical listening and the psychoanalytic thinking are the two *points of view* of a “binocular vision” (Pisanti, 2017) from which what happens in the therapeutic relation can be observed with a greater depth of field. This model also implies that the therapeutic aims are generally focused on the *processes of symbolization*. In other words, the music therapy device, similarly to the psychoanalytic one, aims to serve as a «*transformation system, through which unconscious somatopsychic processes acquire the conditions of representability and become susceptible to binding themselves in thoughts and meanings* » (Riolo, 2002, p. 827, my translation).

### **The psychoanalytic function of music in the music therapy framework**

Music, in the psychoanalytically oriented music therapy (especially in the case of receptive-based techniques), has then a specific *function* that we can now define

*psychoanalytic*. The term “psychoanalytic function” has been previously used in the psychoanalytic theory to refer to a particular functioning of the psychic apparatus. Bion (1962) adopted the expression “psychoanalytic function of personality” for referring to the *α-function*, i.e. that innate capability of the human mind to transform sensorial data of the emotional experience into *α-elements* – among which we find «the visual images, the auditory patterns, olfactory patterns, and [all the material that] are suitable for employment in dream thoughts, unconscious waking thinking, dreams, contact barrier, memory» (*ibid.*, pp. 54-55). That is, he suggests that «the human personality is constitutionally equipped with mental operations that generate a *personal symbolic meaning, consciousness* and the potential for *unconscious psychological work* with one’s emotional problems» (Ogden, 2008, p. 24, my italics). To Hautmann (1981), the psychoanalytic function of mind consists in creating a “film of thought” which has the role of riorganizing the experience in a symbolic way, by “de-energizing” the asymbolic elements and by «making them available for thought operations» (*ibid.*, p. 566, my translation). According to the author, the creation of a film of symbolic thought – already a founding process of a primitive nucleus of the Self in the fetus and continuously operating in the analytic relationship – it would also be the basis of artistic enjoyment: he believes that in aesthetic experience the “thoughts without a thinker” are organized, through the artistic form, into a *selected fact*, thus originating «sketches of structure that become “magnet-containers-meaning-containers” available for more complex integrations» (*ibid.*, p. 569, my translation). Di Chiara and colleagues (1985) focus instead on a specific dimension of the psychoanalytic function of mind linked to the Bionian hypothesis of an “oedipal pre-conception”(6). There would be a human innate tendency to enter into a relationship with *the other*, in turn “pre-conceived” «in relation to a *third*, who remains intuited in the background and gives the relationship quality of depth and unsaturation» (*ibid.*, p. 330, my translation). However, the authors argue that the preconception of the *third* does not concern the father of the oedipal couple but the internal objects of the mother, her “primary preoccupation” (Winnicott, 1956) and the facilitating environment which she herself needs in the first months of life of the child. For this reason, Di Chiara and colleagues consider it more appropriate to replace the concept of “oedipal pre-conception” with that of “tendency to three-dimensionality”. They also suggest that the psychoanalytic function of mind be understood as the «natural capacity of the human mind, present as potentiality from birth [...], to function in a three-dimensional mental space, with three relational polarities: the Ego, the internal objects and the external object» (Di Chiara *et al.*, 1985, p. 335).

Thus, with *psychoanalytic function of music* we first mean the potential of the musical experience of «viewing an emotional situation simultaneously from the perspective of the conscious and unconscious mind» (Ogden, 2008, p. 24). Namely, listening to music, in music therapy work, provides potential elements for a psychological working through of the evoked emotions that simultaneously draws

on two different dimensions of the personality – or, with Matte Blanco (1975), on two different logics. A rational (conscious) listening, dominated by an *asymmetrical*, heterogeneous logic, ordered and orderable in verbal propositions, always coexist with a *symmetrical* (unconscious) listening, which does not take into account logical thinking, the principle of non-contradiction, the parameters of time and space, nor of the verbal language. This can occur mainly due to the substantial “duplicity” of the musical phenomenon (Di Benedetto, 2000, p. 167), of its being present and absent (i.e. invisible, impalpable), of its nature as a “transitional object”. Indeed, a musical track is always simultaneously *found* and *created* by the listener. It presents a cultural, intelligible dimension that recalls the conscious aspects of identity perception and its own history (present and past), but at the same time it evokes a sense of mystery, untraslatability, which refers to the unknown and unexpressed parts of the Self. The physical properties themselves of the sound-musical stimulus, as something «that is both *around* and *within*, which at the same time envelops our skin surface and penetrates our body» (Di Benedetto, 2000, pp. 56-57, my translation), they configure an experience that takes place *outside* and *inside*, something that is there (you can *feel* it) but you cannot see. Secondly, the function of music in therapeutic work can be defined as psychoanalytic because it allows a *personal symbolic meaning* to be attributed to emotional experience. This occurs, as we have seen, for the “symbolizing” properties intrinsic to the *encounter* between the listener and the musical form (Imberty, Langer) as well as for the “progressive” nature of the musical experience (Di Benedetto). By giving priority to the body and sensoriality, music listening *recalls* the archaic aspects of the Self and at the same time *claims* new paths of symbolic processing – *primary symbolization* → *secondary symbolization* that allow the listener to build new meanings starting from unthought, non-verbalized experiences (at first perceived as impersonal, “foreign” or vaguely uncanny). Nevertheless, in receptive music therapy, the symbolic potential of music depends on the intrapsychic/interpsychic dynamics activated by the therapeutic relationship and by *the mediation processes* of the musical object. Shared, listened to and discussed during the music therapy session (whether it is a dual or group setting), the music tracks work as *mediation objects* [*objets de médiation*] or *relationship objects* [*objets de relation*] (Lecourt, 1988; 1993). In other words, they act as «a connection between conscious and unconscious communication and as an articulation between the subjectivities of two or more people» (Privat & Quélin-Souligoux, 2000, p. 52, my translation). The pieces of music – together with the words and the acting out associated with them – assume the role of “presentation” of what is brought into the therapeutic relationship from the *unthought* story of the listeners. What is projected into the sound forms can be «modified, remodeled and transformed by the playing of the intersubjective exchanges» (Vacheret, 2017, my translation). Once become an *object of relationship*, music «gives shape and thematizes what remains “waiting for meaning”» (Gimenez, 2003, p. 44, my translation), that is, it allows to share and work through «what was unthinkable until then» (*ibid.*). To do this, the



music therapist has to exercise a *rêverie* function in the therapeutic relationship (De Backer, 2004; Lecourt, 1993) through which helping patients (or participants of a group) to find «the music in the words and the words in the music» (Priestley, 1975, p. 250). Finally, what makes “psychoanalytic” the elaborative function of music is its natural tendency to put the listener in relationship with *himself*, with an *external object* and with an *inner world*(7) at the same time. In other words, I believe that there is an innate *pre-conception* that a “listening relationship” with a piece of music always refers to a relationship of the latter with a third element – which generally, before assuming a more defined form, is represented by the *gap* between what is known about one’s musical experience and what is not yet. When someone is going to listening music, there are three “relational polarities”: the Ego, the musical object and the unconscious contents of the listener (recalled by the listening experience). In the music therapy framework, this “tridimensional” model of relationship may assume several configurations: the *third* virtually connected with the Ego of the listener, by means of music, may be his own inner world, or the therapist’s inner world or that of the other listeners. Therefore, in this case, the third will be always an “intersubjective third” (Ogden, 1994). This specific aspect of the psychoanalytic function of music is supposed to be innate because the human capability of entering into a relationship is so, as well as human ability to communicate and convey affective contents through the sound-music dimension. Stern’s (1985) and Trevarthen’s (1999) studies in the field of the *infant research* showed that communication and sharing of affective states between mother and baby, since the first months of life, take place mainly through sound exchanges and they have parameters of a musical nature (tone, rhythm, shape, intensity, dynamic profile). Stern highlights that this innate musical expressiveness allows the primitive affective experiences to penetrate the intersubjective field and contribute to the development of the sense of a “subjective Self” (between the seventh and ninth month of life) – through which the child starts to realize his inner life and that of the others. According to Anzieu (1985), the first representation of the Self as a “container” of feelings and affects arises from the exchanges of sounds alternatively produced by the child and by his environment. «Before the glance and smile of the nurturing and caring mother returns to the child his personal image [...], the melodic bath (the mother’s voice, her songs, the music she propose to be listened) makes a first sound mirror available. At first, the child uses it through his cries (calmed by the mother’s voice), then through his twittering, finally with his phonemic articulation games» (*ibid.*, p. 208, my translation). This *sound envelope*, made of sounds coming from the inside and from the outside, is a prefiguration of the Skin-Ego as a frontier that separates and at the same time puts into *relation* an inner space and an outer one. Lecourt (1987) underlines, instead, the group dimension of the sound bath in which the newborn is absorbed; she defines “group-music-originary” the set of noises, musics, words and silences produced by the family environment. She observes that some elements of the undifferentiated and fusional area of the sound bath begin to

differentiate, starting from the first sound exchanges that the child has with the people around: «[the various] vocal qualities, [the] rhythms of the sound exchange come to organize spaces and relational times of a common area» (*ibid.*, p. 172, my translation). In the experience and the *musical* interaction of the child, a first distinction appears between the mother and the others, between males and females, children and adults, pleasant and unpleasant emotions. It can be then assumed that the first internalization processes of the child take place starting from the sound qualities of the objects. Susanne Maiello's theories (1995) around the "sound-object" might support this hypothesis. The author proposes that the maternal voice perceived by the fetus from the fifth month of gestation constitutes the "raw material" for the formation of a proto-object. The presence of the maternal voice – with its volume, timbre, cadence – together with its absence, could represent, according to Maiello, the first realization of a «preconception of the breast» (*ibid.*, p. 27) and therefore a basis for the construction of the postnatal maternal object. It is then clearer that the sound expression, the melody, the rhythm allow us to enter into relationship with the others, but they also put us from the beginning in relationship with something that is *inside* (one's own inner world and the other's inner world) and which has to deal with preverbal emotions and affections.

The *psychoanalytic function of music* (together with the psychoanalytically informed approach of the music therapist) therefore allows the person or group of people involved in the shared listening activities to perform a psychological work that aims to elaborate emotional experiences remained in a state of non-representability and to get a greater understanding of oneself (as well as oneself-with-the-others). By presenting a short excerpt from a receptive music therapy experience, carried out during the Covid-19 emergency, I will now highlight how this function can support the working through/transformation of traumatic experiences and feelings related to the "mourning", the loss and the sense of emptiness.

### **The unheard melodies of the quarantine: a receptive music therapy experience during the Covid-19 emergency**

In many ways, the Covid-19 emergency represented a real "catastrophic change", both worldwide and in large communities and at the level of the individual. The constant threat of contagion, the sense of uncertainty, the state of "lockdown" and the sudden reduction of our field of action strongly questioned our internal structure, shaking an "established order" made of habits, commitments, meetings, and points of reference. This led to feelings of confusion, apprehension or anguish mostly "unthinkable", difficult to be managed and understood. In other words, the state of emergency and the containment measures against the pandemic represented the point of origin for experiences where the "violence" and the intensity of the emotions have 'overloaded' our capability to think about them. This circumstance can therefore be considered "traumatic" precisely to the extent that «the quantitative level of

stimulation ( $\beta$  elements) exceeds what can be transformed into  $\alpha$  and rendered thinkable» (Ferro, 2002, p. 2)(8).

In this scenario, music has often represented a preferential “channel” through which the *nameless* emotions linked to the emergency experience could flow, carrying out different functions depending on the “phases” of the pandemic: at first, music has been an instrument of *escape* from the quarantine – I am referring to the “flash mobs” on the balconies and the music played at such high volumes as to ‘get’ down into the streets and into the houses of the neighbors; subsequently, music acted through a more intimate listening, as a *protective envelope* with which to try to “mend” the tears caused by the prolonged state of emergency and to contain the chaotic and fragmented feelings determined by this situation. Heard music thus becomes a music that hears, embraces and *comprehends* our experiences, but without being able to represent their contents. In this regard, I organized short online group receptive music therapy experiences with the association I belong to. Through experiences of music listening and verbal discussing, these therapeutic paths had the aim of trying to trace and build the emotional meanings and the words with which to shape the unthinkable aspects related to the pandemic.

The methodology adopted can be considered a personal revision of the *Musical Presentation*, a receptive technique developed by Dorit Amir (Amir, 2012; Bensimon & Amir, 2010) and used for training and group work. The experiences I organized addressed small groups (maximum eight participants) and included ten sessions, lasting an hour and a half each, which took place online on the video conferencing software Zoom. For each group of participants, a WhatsApp group was created, exclusively dedicated to service communications and organizational issues. During the meetings, each participant had the opportunity to create and present to the group a musical sequence consisting of the songs (or excerpts of songs) which he believed best represented his own experiences relating to the quarantine. The only criterion to be followed in the realization of the sequence was the overall duration, which should have been approximately between 15 and 25 minutes (including any silences between one song and another). There was no indication as to the musical genre, the length of the pieces or the extracts, the duration of the silences. Each session was dedicated to the musical presentation of only one participant and during each meeting any member of the group could feel free to propose himself/herself for presentation in the next session. Each musical sequence was reproduced in full, without interruption, and listened to in silence. During the listening experience, it was possible to write or draw what was brought to mind by music. At the end of the reproduction, the author of the sequence had the opportunity to choose whether to speak first and share his experience of listening, selecting the songs, the motivation of his choices, etc. with the group, or whether to wait for a feedback from the other participants.

I am now going to present the session no. 5 of one of the online group paths carried out during the quarantine. The group was made up of six participants: C. (woman, 57 years old), G. (woman, 45 years old), L. (woman, 54 years old), M.

(man, 55 years old), S. (woman, 59 years old) and V. (woman, 35 years old). The group met online on Monday and Thursday, during the months of April and May. The first four sessions saw the group members oscillate between the pleasure of *discovering themselves* on the purely emotional level of sound and music and the difficulty (sometimes bordering on frustration) of not being able to express themselves and to communicate satisfactorily on the verbal level. This often manifested itself in the participant's free association in terms of a *contrast*: between a simpler life in the childhood and youth and the complexity of "modern times"; between the duty to "go forward" and the need to "go back"; between what is *no longer* (memories or images related to past epochs) and what is *not yet* (desires and fantasies related to the future). Session no. 5 took place on Monday – a few days after the beginning of the "Phase 2" of the emergency(9) – after the two meetings of the previous week had both been postponed. The first one for my decision, due to a sudden family mourning – which actually had a strong resonance in the local community (to which the majority of the participants belonged). As for the second one, after S. and G. communicated on the WhatsApp group (a few hours from the beginning of the session) that they would not be able to be present, M. proposes to postpone again the meeting and take the whole week as a "pause for thought". C. responds to this proposal by expressing some disappointment – which she would have, however, put aside if the rest of the group had agreed. A few minutes later, V. (who should have presented his musical sequence in that session) writes that she too would have preferred to postpone the meeting if this had allowed a more peaceful and complete sharing experience for everyone. L.'s reply follows, stating that she agrees to postpone. At that point, although I had not planned to use the WhatsApp group for these purposes, I decide to intervene observing that perhaps it could be useful to read the request of this "sabbatical week" as the expression of an implicit difficulty in the working through which, through music, we are trying to do with our own experiences relating to the emergency, the quarantine and the idea of restart. I ask myself, still addressing the group, if it is really *restart* – after an unexpected and imposed suspension – what requires the greatest efforts. In this regard, it is worth pointing out that the first postponed session coincided with the first day of Phase 2 (the beginning of a new "restart") and the second one, with the restart of music therapy after a meeting suddenly *lost*. In other words, it would seem that the repeated absence in the space of the group has *enacted*, on the one hand, the experience of loss – first linked to the restrictive measures imposed by the emergency and then to the postponement of the session – and, on the other, the difficulty in working through the "mourning" in times perhaps perceived as too rapid. However, the absence within the music-therapeutic process, also becomes absence-of-sounds, silences, and therefore an *other* form of musical presence. Framed by music, the silences *become* "rests" (pauses) and acquire the value of *spaces of signifying* in which the previous notes and the subsequent ones gain a greater richness of meaning. Worked through within the music therapy framework, the suspension week could then be interpreted as a way to



*play* or *listen to* the silence – a “pause for thought” to give form to the enacted emotions and provide a “potential space” in which to receive the *sounds* to come. So I decide to accept the proposal to postpone the second meeting of that week, giving them an appointment on the following Monday.

During the day in which session no. 5 took place, S. communicates that she will not be there this time either. The meeting, during which V. are going to present his musical sequence, begins with the delay of some participants. G. justifies himself by saying she has “lost track of time”, while M. seems to have had some problems accessing the meeting. In the first few minutes, the group complains that they cannot hear me well because of the poor quality of the connection that made my voice jerky – making my speech fragmented and difficult to understand. Once the technical problem has been resolved, I begin the meeting by proposing to try to look at the decision to take a week off from the group perspective. After a few seconds of silence, rather intense exchanges follow in which the participants communicate ambivalent feelings about the new emergency phase. They talk about the pleasure of being reunited with loved ones, but also about the fear that people will not take into account the security measures imposed. There is a shared concern about the risk to forget the efforts and sacrifices made so far. Some participants wonder if today they would have chosen different songs from those selected in the previous weeks (someone answers yes). C. intervenes stating that she feels the need to hope, to believe that *everything will be fine*, even at the cost of having to partially “deny” the threat of contagion still looming. M. suddenly refers to my mourning, for which the session of the previous Monday has been postponed, thus giving “form” to a feeling that seems to emerge more and more clearly in the group field. After a short pause, he returns to the question of the choice of songs, arguing that it is not fair to think that we want to “change the old songs” in the passage to Phase 2 (he would not do it), but they must be considered as previous stages of a single path linear. At this point, I intervene by observing that perhaps the silence expressed *with* the week off could have much to do with what is circulating now in the group. Meanwhile, the discussion seems to thin out, it becomes less intense. V. takes the floor saying, perplexed, that she did not expect to experience this feeling of loss once she “put her nose out”. After a few seconds of silence, she continues by saying that she has the impression that to move forward there will be a need to “mourn” the quarantine, as something that has been lost. I share with the group the feeling that behind the fear that people forget the persistence of the virus all of a sudden, the fear is hidden that we forget what the quarantine has shown us and that we end up losing sight of what we need to *move forward*. Another silence follows, which lasts just over a minute. I have the impression that the words are withdrawing, to make room for *something else*. So I start talking again, saying that maybe there is something beyond the words that is trying to express itself and I then propose to listen to the musical sequence created by V. All the participants seem to agree, so I ask them to turn off the microphones and I start playback. V.’s sequence is very intense, dense and with short

silences. The selected tracks(10) are all fragments of songs (no full songs) and the lyrics, mainly in Italian, seem to have a central role with respect to the instrumental parts (here exclusively as a support to the singing). The musical genre is mostly singer-songwriting (pop music) but, nevertheless, the way in which the sound material is put in sequence generates a rather dynamic, fast rhythmic sensation.

After playback, I ask them to reactivate the microphones. After about a minute of silence, I remind V. that she can choose whether to speak or listen to others' comments first. She reports to be curious about what others have heard. From this moment, very rich and articulated verbal interventions follow one another (with a fairly tight rhythm). Each participant intervenes by communicating their impressions about the musical sequence presented by V. From the exchanges there emerges an atmosphere of agreement, of understanding (“an underlying optimism”, as M. notes). The comments of the other participants, as well as those of the same V., focus mainly on the words of the lyrics and on the thoughts and images that they evoked. The group's verbal associations and the unspoken affections cross and ‘mix’ against the sound background of the sequence of V., which echoes within each intervention. The discourse seems to move towards depressive themes: the melancholy of what has been left open due to the pandemic; the “departure” from a familiar place towards something unknown; childhood memories; the things found or discovered during the quarantine (values, passions, a different conception of time) which are now in danger of being lost; the criticism of the pre- and post-quarantine lifestyle based on speed and the lack of time and space to devote to ourselves. In the *subtext*, a “grammar of contrasts” (as L. commented referring to the selection of V.) seems to continue to prevail between the desire to remain “suspended” and the need to start again. At a certain point, G. communicates the feeling that V., with the songs she has selected, has often recalled the concept of “home”. Suddenly, the rhythm (that of sentences, but also that of verbal exchanges) seems to slow down. V. replies that that comment made her think of a song entitled *Home* (suggested to her by a very dear person) that she was unable to include in the selection for “space issues”. As V. speaks, her voice breaks and she begins to sob, remembering how much she missed her family during the “lockdown”. Something important, that so far had not *found space* within the group, seems to have suddenly taken form(11). Referring to the fact that V. got married only a few months before the start of the quarantine, M. intervenes reminding her that she now has another home and it is important that she faces *the transition* from the childhood home to the new one. It seems to me that this last exchange between M. and V. represented a “warning” that the group made to itself, namely that of not denying what *was* in the quarantine, of facing the painful transitions (between the before, the during and the post-quarantine) and of working through the “mournings”, in order not to let everything be lost.

A few minutes of silence follow, while the session is about to end. V. starts talking again asking who will present in the next meeting. L. proposes herself and immediately after G. refers to me and to the fact that I have been in silence for a long

time – “He was thinking”, says M. jokingly, “he is about to say something!”. After a few seconds, I reply that perhaps I took the parts of a silence that in this meeting (and even before the meeting) *played* the things that could not yet be said. I keep saying that perhaps, to ensure that these contents were not lost, there had to be a silence even under the words. In other terms, it would seem that in the group I was the depositary of “formless” depressive feelings and that, in order to be *thought*, they needed a “musical silence” (a *rest*) capable of transforming the previous “notes” that resonate and those that are about to be played.

## Conclusions

The music therapy session presented highlighted how the psychoanalytic function of music (but I would say, in this case, also the psychoanalytic function of the music therapy *setting*) first allowed to *hear* the sense of emotional experiences not yet symbolized and, subsequently, to begin to *say* (i.e. to find the words to “say them”). In other words, the listened music, through its sound organization and the way in which it was shared, lent an “audible form” to the preverbal contents within the group, allowing participants to see the features of something that is trying to be thought. The musical-therapeutic relationship allowed to co-build a common semiotic and pre-representative background from which to begin to «“play” with the unspeakable and on which to be able to gradually re-construct/re-elaborate the “text” of the traumatic experience» (Manna *et al.*, 2020, p. 124, my translation). The coexistence of text and music – which, as Boyer (1992) clearly observes, draws on two different dimensions of the psychic apparatus – has stimulated the potential of music to support the psychological work of listeners on a simultaneously conscious and unconscious level. As the group’s discourse developed, the musical dimension gave a *dynamic form* to the unthinkable desire to deny the loss and the work of mourning related to the experience of the pandemic. This was made possible also by the *polyphonic functioning* that characterizes both the music and the group (Lecourt, 1993). In fact, it has allowed the two dimensions – musical and verbal – to proceed in parallel to form a “third” discourse in which the meeting between the expressed thoughts and the unspoken emotions has opened up new spaces of *thinkability* and *symbolization*.

Receptive music therapy techniques represent only some of the therapeutic situations in which it is possible to observe the potential of the psychoanalytic function of music. This paper, in fact, also intends to be a starting point from which to deepen the way in which this function is manifested and promotes the therapeutic process in “active” techniques – in which the use of musical instruments and free improvisation and a different use of the body are foreseen.

## Note

1) Like the *tall tree* in *The Sonnets to Orpheus* composed by Rilke: “*Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tall tree in the ear! / [...] a new beginning, beckoning, change appeared*”.

- 2) Although from a different perspective, musicologist Christopher Small also came to a similar conclusion: «There is no such thing as music. Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do» (Small, 1998, p. 2). For this reason, Small believes we should speak of *musicking* (a verb) rather than music.
- 3) Langer's observations will later be taken up and used by Stern in his research on the child's psychological development and the dynamics of early interpersonal relationships (Stern, 1985).
- 4) With *acoustic* and *musical rêverie* we mean two different types of "auditory imagination" (by the therapist) that can occur in the clinical setting as a product of shared creation in the encounter with the patient (*intersubjective third*). The *acoustic rêverie* mainly concerns the phonic aspects of language – that "secret score" of the patient's speech (Di Benedetto, 2010) hidden among the folds of verbal meanings; instead, in the *musical rêverie* the therapist's imaginative elaboration occur in the form of fragments of songs, melodies and musical works that emerge in his mind at a given moment of the session.
- 5) Actually, I believe that in order to define a music therapy "psychoanalytically oriented" it is not enough that the music therapist has deepened the psychoanalytic theories and knows how to *apply* them to the therapeutic situation, but above all it is necessary that he has also undertaken a personal analysis and psychoanalytic supervisions.
- 6) Bion (1963) proposes to consider the oedipal material that emerges in the session as the evidence for a "primitive apparatus of pre-conception". In other words, he postulates «a precursor of the Oedipal situation [...] as something that belongs to the ego as part of its apparatus for contact with reality» (p. 93).
- 7) I consider it more appropriate to use the generic expression "inner world" (understood here as an unconscious psychic space populated by symbolized and non-symbolized elements), rather than the more specific one of "internal objects", since the musical experience draws dimensions and contents most of the times pre-object.
- 8) In this case, the  $\beta$  elements "in excess" remain *sedimented* «outside the sphere of symbol-formation and thought» (Meltzer, 1986, p. 36) waiting to be "dreamed".
- 9) It should be remembered that in Italy, starting from Phase 2, it was again possible to move between different municipalities (not between regions), to visit family or friends without "proven reasons" (however keeping distance and wearing safety devices), go down for a walk or to play sports and, only for some categories of professionals, go back to work.
- 10) Musical sequence lasting about 27 minutes, consisting of: 1. *Napul'è* by Pino Daniele (2:05 min. expt); 2. *Capo d'Africa* by Francesco De Gregori (1:45 min. expt); 3. *La donna cannone* by Francesco De Gregori (2:37 min. expt); 4. *La marmellata* by Bobo Rondelli (1:21 min. expt); 5. *Zenzero e cannella* by Joe Barbieri (1:22 min. expt); 6. *Redemption Song* by Bob Marley (2:15 min. expt); 7. *Le cose che piacciono a me* from the movie "Tutti insieme appassionatamente" (1:25 min. expt); 8. *Sandra portami al mare* by 360° (1:05 min. expt); 9. *Occidentali's Karma* by



Francesco Gabbani (0:33 min. expt); 10. *Far finta di essere sani* by Giorgio Gaber (1:42 min. expt); 11. *Father and Son* by Cat Stevens (1:56 min. expt); 12. *Settembre* by Gazzelle (2:11 min. expt). Each song was followed by a silence that ranged from 20 to 50 seconds.

**11)** This passage would seem to signal what Neri (2009) defined as a “change of the field”, intended as a *break* and *alteration* of a rhythm, of a «synchronization of basic, somatic and mental functions» shared by the members of the group.

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