

The contribution of music to quality of life in older people: an Australian qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the personal meaning and importance of music in the lives of older people, paying particular attention to the ways in which music contributes to self-identity and the quality of life. The data derive from qualitative interviews with a sample of older Australians aged 65 years and over who live in rural and urban settings. The findings reveal that music provides people with ways of understanding and developing their self-identity, of connecting with other people, of maintaining wellbeing and of experiencing and expressing spirituality, and that it provides strong associations with and memories of a person's life. Specifically, the results show how music is used as a source of entertainment as well as a forum to share and interact with others. Music was described as a personal experience to which people assigned meaning and emotions. The informants also described how music allowed them to engage in imaginative play and to escape from some of the hardships experienced in later life. The results reveal that music promotes quality of life by contributing to positive self-esteem, by helping people feel competent and independent, and by lessening feelings of isolation and loneliness. The paper argues that music can be used to maintain and promote a better quality of life for older people.

KEY WORDS – music, quality of life, wellbeing, identity, health.

Introduction

All cultures have music: it is part of our collective everyday living and heard, for example, in advertising and films, on radio and television and at sporting events. Music accompanies church liturgies and our rites of passage, as at baptisms, weddings and funerals (Storr 1992). It is used to promote nationalistic and local pride through national anthems, team loyalty and support at sporting events; to cultivate romance during courtship; to promote connection at social gatherings; and it bestows a sense of individual spirituality. If music is an important part of our lives, is it possible that through music we are able to interpret and assign meaning?

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Kenny (1999) argued that people use music to give meaning to life experiences, and Bright (1995) showed the ways in which music elicits cognitive, physical and emotional responses. In *The Secret Power of Music*, Tame (1984: 14) stated:

whenever we are within audible range of music, its influence is playing upon us constantly, such as speeding or slowing, regularising or irregularising our heart-beat, relaxing or jarring the nerves, affecting the blood pressure, the digestion and the rate of respiration. Its effect upon the emotions and desires of [people] is believed to be vast, and the extent of its influence over even the purely intellectual, mental processes is only beginning to be suspected by researchers.

The literature reveals how music is used as a healing tool, for example, in reducing stress and anxiety, depression, helplessness and low self-esteem, and in enhancing immune functioning (Aldridge 1996; Maranto 1993; Ragneskog *et al.* 1996; White 1992; Winter, Paskin and Baker 1994). Music has also been found to elicit physiological and psychological responses (McCraty *et al.* 1996; Tomatis 1991) and to evoke imagery and associations (Harvey 1995). Music is now increasingly used, for example, to alter the perception of chronic pain (Rider 1987; Schorr 1993), and for people with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias to facilitate communication and provide them with a connection to the past and present (Brotons, Koger and Pickett-Cooper 1997; Christie 1992; Clair 1990; Koger, Chapin and Brotons 1999). In a study of dementia patients living in residential care, Ragneskog *et al.* (1996) found that playing soothing music during meal times helped settle some of the restless patients and helped them to engage in social activities, such as dancing and singing, and to perform daily routines. This is not a new discovery, however, as during the Egyptian civilizations, scribes recorded the use of music in medical practice (Bunt 1996). Studies have also found that music helps people engage in social activities (Davis 1999), form friendships and social networks (Blacking 1995), and feel accepted, valued and needed (Kahn 2001), and that it aids life-long learning (Harju 1998; Small 1996).

Music has also been shown to provide people with ways of discovering and interpreting their identity. DeNora (1999), for example, argued that people can find a sense of *self* in music because musical materials provide terms and symbols for the elaboration of self-identity. Music can be a medium, others argue, through which people express themselves and evoke mood enhancement, mood change and spiritual or transcendent functions (Sloboda 1991, 1999; Sloboda and O'Neill 2001). It is a way that some people come to know and make sense of the society in which they live (DeNora 2000). Music allows a person to create an internal, individual virtual world (Blacking 1995). That is, music provides people with another reality of time and an opportunity to create a new sense of order and

harmony in their lives (Storr 1992). For this reason, music can be understood as a transformer and metaphor in people's lives that makes a significant contribution to the quality of life. By putting them in touch with remembered or previously unfelt emotions, music has an exceptional capacity to express people's moods and mental states. Music – like yoga, meditation or *Tai Chi* – not surprisingly enables people to probe more deeply into their spiritual selves (Scarantino 1987).

Aims and methods

This paper describes an empirical study of the personal meaning and importance of music in the lives of older people, and synthesises the findings with the understanding acquired by the authors from a large body of writing and empirical research in the humanities and the social sciences on these topics. The new analysis focuses on raising our understanding of the relationship between people and the music they make, experience and share with others.

The initial data collection was from two focus group discussions that identified the primary themes for in-depth interviews. The first was a 'heterogeneous' group of two men and five women of varied backgrounds, affiliations and exposure to music; the second involved a 'homogeneous' group of eight older people who were actively involved in making music as amateur musicians. Following the two focus group discussions, 38 in-depth interviews were conducted, 19 with men and 19 with women (and only four with members of the focus groups). Table 1 presents the pseudonym of each informant and their gender, age, and summary descriptions of their first involvement and their lifetime involvement with music. All the informants were aged 60 or more years and the oldest 98 years of age. The level of musical expertise of the informants ranged from those with no musical skills or knowledge who engaged mostly by listening, through amateur musicians with musical training, to those who had been professional musicians and in a few cases were still teaching.

Twenty informants were drawn from the major Australian cities of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Newcastle and from rural and coastal towns, such as Armidale and Coffs Harbour, and 18 lived in rural communities. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the informants and transcribed for analysis by the authors. The in-depth interviews were informal, open discussions that centred on the meaning and importance of music in the informant's life, and all were conducted in the informants' homes. There were open-ended questions on the perceived benefits of being engaged in music making or listening. The conceptual

TABLE I. *Selected characteristics of the in-depth interviewees*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age (yrs)	First involvement in music	Lifetime involvement
Robert	M	73	Childhood singing	Professional
Morton	M	71	Childhood singing	Amateur
Joe	M	70	Childhood singing	Amateur
Don	M	70	Childhood singing	Professional
Donald	M	90	Childhood singing	Professional
Bunty	F	74	Childhood singing	Listening only
Neville	M	72	Childhood singing	Amateur
Eileen	F	71	Music lessons/singing	Professional
Bob	M	67	Teenager/concerts	Listening only
Elizabeth	F	68	Singing/school	Listening only
Noel	M	68	Child music lessons	Listening
Jane	F	72	Teenager/family	Listening only
Dennis	M	73	Child	Professional
John	M	69	High school	Amateur
Margaret	F	68	Child/music/lessons	Amateur
Keith	F	65	Child sing/teens	Amateur
June	F	73	Child sing/music lessons	Amateur
Mildred	F	98	Child music lessons	Professional
Hal	M	73	Child music lessons	Professional
Kevin	M	69	School singing	Listening only
Phil	M	67	School music lessons	Amateur
Maureen	F	68	Childhood singing	Listening only
Pam	F	67	Child sing/music lessons	Amateur
Joan	F	69	Child/music lessons	Amateur
Julie	F	62	Child/music lessons	Professional
Margot	F	69	Child/sing	Listen/sing
Frank	M	64	Child/music lessons	Semi-professional
Glenda	F	78	Child sing/music lessons	Professional
Ian	M	67	Child sing/music lessons	Semi-professional
Carole	F	65	Child singing	Listening only
James	M	68	Child concerts	Amateur
Peter	M	74	Child music lessons	Professional
Patricia	F	75	Child piano lessons	Listening only
David	M	72	Child piano lessons	Listening only
Bev	F	68	Child piano lessons	Listening only
May	F	72	Child/music lessons	Amateur
Noreen	F	90	Child piano lessons	Listening only
Graham	M	68	Childhood	Listening only

framework that guided the themes and the analysis is that the *self* is an agent that uses symbols to define his or her experiences. Following DeNora (1999), this study frames engagement with music (or particular works or performances) as symbols that people use to give meaning to experiences and emotions.

During the interviews specific musical genres were not discussed, nor were the informants asked to identify their preferred forms or styles. This was purposely done to minimise the researchers' interpretation bias and to maximise the depth of the informants' responses. It soon became clear that

most of those who were most passionate about music in their life were engaged with its 'classical' or 'serious' forms. It is also interesting to note that many informants said that they enjoyed their retirement because they now were able 'to find time to indulge', including spending more time on musical activities.

The analysis was a process of 'thematic discovery' from the transcribed in-depth interviews using the methodological principles of open and axial coding described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The recurring themes of interest were identified by repeated examination and cross-checking of the codes identified for the individual transcripts and in the collective data set. There were four rounds of interviews. During the second and later rounds, the interviews were centred on the themes, issues or ideas that had emerged from the already analysed data. For example, participants spoke of spirituality and the 'connection' of music. As the interviews progressed, the research team sought clarification on this connection and how people gave meaning to spirituality. The coding categories were validated by other members of the research team.

Findings of the study

The data showed that music had meaning and importance in many of the informants' lives, and although there were no major differences between the responses of those who had been professional musicians and those who had had little or no training in music, many of the latter were more articulate about the importance of music and how it contributed to their wellbeing and quality of life. The identified themes included: wellbeing, connection, spirituality, and the benefits of music. While music for some people was a source of entertainment, for others it functioned as a way of sharing and connecting in their lives, of linking life events, of promoting personal wellbeing, and helping to manage time. For some it was therapeutic, and for some it had a strong spiritual significance. The following sections discuss the ways in which music created meaning in the lives of the informants using the dominant grounded themes.

Sharing and connecting

The social aspect of sharing music with others was a recurrent theme. For many older people, music had provided important opportunities for socialising and continued to be a way of meeting and interacting with others. The following examples provide insights into the ways in which music facilitated social connections. For Bob, music brought people together

to sing and perform. The same applied to Owen who recalled social gatherings where people would participate in music activities, such as singing around the piano. Bob considered these social occasions to have been good times and regretted that their frequency had declined:

I think [our] age group represents [remembers] a time in which we enjoyed music brought about by people associating with one another, visiting and enjoying singing at the piano and bringing it all together and at various times performing to individuals on their behalf and contributing to a large extent towards our way of life, and we notice very much how a situation like that has changed, and it's rather a shame in many ways.

Owen similarly reminisced, 'What we don't have now that I can recall when we were much younger, was singing around the piano at night time, you know, at parties and so forth, where somebody would play the piano and there'd be about 20 people. They were good times. That doesn't happen now'. Many other informants' experiences of music were linked with the concept of 'connection'. This was largely because the joy and pleasure of music was intensified when shared with others. Through sharing music with others, many of the informants revealed who they were without having to use language and conversation. As Noreen said, 'You don't need to discuss it, it's just there; but you realise you are sharing it because no words are needed, but just the emotion of it'. Elizabeth made similar points, for her friendships and experience of music with others was about sharing emotions:

The social aspect of music is very important to me and I think that's because a thing of joy should be shared and therefore the pleasure does seem to become intensified when a group of people hear a performance ... so that it's very important for my wellbeing to share my joy of music with other people. It is part of our nature I think to share joy, share emotions. So music has I think an increasingly important part to play as people get older for that reason. ... It's very difficult to catch the subtleties in a conversation. That[s] also because I'm sure there are lots of other things you wish to talk about, but the effect of sound basically on the human soul and on the human brain does trigger off emotions.

Through music the informants had been able to develop friendships. For Donald and Julie, music was a way of being introduced to and finding common ground with new people. Donald felt that many of his friendships arose through a connection with music: his view was that 'music makes friends, you make friends through music. Had it not been for music I probably wouldn't have made many friends at all'. For Julie, engaging in musical activities was an important way of meeting new people and forming close personal bonds. She recounted:

I did travel around Europe by myself and, yes, the international language is true ... you'd be in a train with a group of Italians or French or whoever and you

know the inevitable question comes when they hear you speak English to the conductor or something, 'Where are you from, what are you doing?' And the minute you said you had anything to do with music then the smiles are there: people find a common ground and they want to chat and in that way, yes, that's a social thing.

Linking life events

The informants' expressions demonstrated that the experience of music held strong associations and memories, many connected to particular life events. One informant said that music 'related to the warm spots of people's lives', such as childhood, family, school-days, romantic attachments, friendships, courting-days, parenting, and special events such as births, marriage and deaths. For many of the informants, the music of their youth and courting had some of the strongest memories. All the informants spoke of many personal associations. As Margaret stated, 'something will stir a memory and you'll want to go and find it'. Music also facilitated connections with the past. Maureen had many musical memories and associations with her childhood and family and as a nun singing in a choir:

Music. Yes, so I mean music sort of seeps in[to] my definition of soul, it really seeps into my soul as I said before. ... I mean a lot of my memories and a lot of my emotional responses to music would have been of those early years of the choir.

For Donald music provided a direct link to people, places and events in his life. He said, 'You see, there is a direct link back to your whole life. Strong memories of sensations, emotions, people and places ... they are still very vivid in my mind'. Elizabeth believed that all of the significant events in her life were associated with a particular musical work. In the following excerpt, she described the associations prompted by a Beethoven work which she found 'dramatic, thrilling and absorbing', and she described the excitement of travelling inter-state to see her lover:

I think most major events in my life have been marked by an association with some composition ... or part of a composition. For example, like most young girls I was very excited when I first became engaged ... I was engaged to a medical student who lived in Brisbane. Now, I had finished uni[versity] and worked in Sydney, so that meant to have this great romantic meeting every time, it meant getting on a plane ... a much longer flight than now of course ... and my sort of desires and hopes about this romance was such that it inspired music. So a particular piece of music, a Beethoven piece, just kept coming to me. Now I associated that excitement. ... Whenever I hear [that] bit of music now, it does bring back those memories of me on a plane in a blue sky with white fluffy clouds going up to meet my beloved, sort of thing. It was dramatic, compelling, absorbing.

Music is important to people for many different reasons. Peter suggested that music ‘has very powerful effects on the imagination’. Music is abstract and people assign their own emotions to it. These assigned emotions are the ones that move people when listening or performing musical works. He also suggested that music could call up ‘normally buried aspects of the imagination’. As a result, people often make associations when listening to music. Peter equated the associations with the memory of ‘agreeable and disagreeable friends’:

... so people, see, have visions in their minds when they hear music, other people think of personal relationships and music has the power to call up these normally buried things, I think. In that respect I suppose music helps one like literature [does], I think it helps one to know something about one’s self: really it’s a thing of self-discovery, isn’t it?

The memory association triggered by music, however, was not always pleasant. Some informants deliberately avoided certain pieces of music that made them melancholic and feel down. Others, like Graham, said that he chose music to complement such moods. When, for instance, he was feeling down he chose music that allowed him to ‘wallow in his thoughts’. The informants mentioned that music had brought more intense experiences as they had grown older. For many, music had changed from being a source of social interaction and entertainment to something that met more personal and therapeutic needs; in many cases after being widowed or finding that they wished to live a quieter life. Margaret put it like this: ‘Well I think it’s got more intense. I mean the need for it is more intense as I get older’. And Keith recollected:

Thinking back, the changes in my musical life have been quite dramatic in that, you know, the younger years were just all singing with my brothers and sisters all around, and then graduating to my own children who didn’t sing but they played with their hands. And now to the quiet time of my life, that’s quite different.

Other informants had found that both their personal tastes and need for different types of music had changed over the years. Many said that they increasingly preferred soothing rather than loud and intrusive music. As Lorna said, ‘Well, myself, for example, I used to love music, country music, and as I got older, and still getting older, I feel my taste has changed – I don’t like country music as much as I used to. I especially don’t like loud music’.

Music and wellbeing

The informants described the ways in which music played an important role in promoting a sense of wellbeing. They explained that this involved

balancing the intellectual, emotional and spiritual facets of their lives. Don summed up many of the expressions well: 'I believe, as human beings, we are made up bodily, mentally and spiritually, and music comes into your whole being and if you happen to be down, which is not very often, it uplifts you, but music flows and brings something extra into you, and I think that all helps in your general wellbeing'. Pam spoke of how music made her competent to carry out routine daily tasks:

If I have some difficult tasks to do and I hear (say on the radio) the right music, I do better, I'm more efficient, I work better. I think more clearly, I feel healthy. If I'm down or feeling tired, or my bones are aching and I play some nice music recordings, I feel better. I feel fitter, I feel more competent.

Donald spoke of the contribution of music to his experience of wellbeing when he stated that music had always had a strong influence on his emotions and senses: 'Regarding your life, your quality of life, it is something which has so much a strong influence on you, especially on your senses, on your emotions, and that's how it's been all my life. Music has been not only my love, but it's been a great influence in my life'. Music also had a strong emotional and intellectual influence on Jane's daily sense of wellbeing:

I just feel that part of my life is missing [if there is no music]. It's just there all the time. It's something that I enjoy so much. I think it's stimulus, emotional, sometimes exciting which I think it's something you listen to and it can be an intellectual exercise if you want it to be, but I don't like that part of it. I've been to concerts and people say, 'Oh dear, the violins weren't all in tune', or something like that, and I don't go into it like that at all. To me, it's an overall experience, picture, however you like to put it.

The informants spoke of music as providing a sense of 'inner happiness', 'inner contentment', 'inner satisfaction' and 'inner peace'. Donald said that it is 'something from outside that you absorb and it gives you, through your senses, aural and emotional ... it does something to the chemistry of the body which gives you a feeling of peace and happiness'. For informants to have a sense of wellbeing and happiness, they did not always need audio stimuli and could rely on internal hearing. Inner hearing is when one is attentive to music that one hears in the mind. It has already been mentioned that Bob enjoyed walking down the street and listening internally to music that occupied his attention. Bev provided another example of the importance of internal hearing:

Music has always been important in my life and I must have it. I listen to it every day and every night. If I can't listen to it, I can still hear it in my head. For instance, I can hear and sing all of *Tosca* in my mind without having to hear it.

The therapeutic benefits of music

One of the strongest themes to emerge was that music has a therapeutic effect and alleviates stress. Robert, for example, said ‘music has a calming effect on me, releases your tension. It’s like a massage, a mental massage, if you like’. For some, music equated with a psychological need, and for others it was directly associated with the physical aspects of playing music, *e.g.* singing and breath control, playing the organ to keep the fingers, feet and mind agile, and playing the piano to maintain technique. Pam said that playing the piano ‘is wonderful because (a) I’m not very good and (b) I’ve got arthritis in the hands. So that’s another thing that music gives back to me is keeping my fingers reasonably free of arthritis. ... and of course it’s such an all-absorbing thing. It takes up so much of my time’.

Playing a musical instrument and maintaining instrumental technique was important for many informants as they grew older. There are benefits that extended beyond the physical ability and technical agility required to play a musical instrument. For example, Phil enjoyed playing the organ because it required a degree of physical stamina and a way of being intellectually and cognitively stimulated. He also believed that singing directly contributed to his health because of the positive effect that it had on his respiratory system:

And [on] the mind, very much so. I don’t have to tell you that the organist has got to use his brain quite a lot. It’s one of the most demanding disciplines there is in music, I think, to cope with a variety of medium-sized organs and to read the music, three staves thereof. It keeps the brain cells busy. There is another aspect of music and health and wellbeing that’s important ... involvement in serious choral music is tremendously helpful to one’s respiratory system.

For Morton, ‘music is a most important part of my life, daily, all the time’ and he believed that singing was ‘the barometer of his vitality, that if you were feeling crook you didn’t sing too well, but if you started to sing then you’d feel better’. Regular music-making either by playing an instrument or singing was agreed by most of the informants to provide many benefits, including keeping the brain stimulated and the body healthy and functioning. Playing an instrument was viewed as contributing towards a positive outlook on life and even a way of ‘warding off’ the ageing process. For James, music kept his mind stimulated, which was especially important as he grew old and experienced decreasing physical ability:

And I do think it keeps the mind active. I think I’ve seen a couple of my former colleagues who retired about the same time. When I meet them, I hate to say it, but they haven’t got much to offer now. I mean they ... almost their minds have gone into a state of vegetation. I think it’s very important ‘cos people have to be aware if they are getting older they can’t do some of the things they might have been able to do when they were younger – certainly from the physical sense.

Therefore I think they ought to make up for that loss of physical ability by keeping the mind as active as possible.

Music has many psychological benefits. Speaking about how music provided a tranquil respite from the noise and clutter of everyday life, one informant said, 'if there is lots of noise and chaos around me, I just long to hear music'. Some informants described music as alleviating depression, loneliness and general tiredness. Others spoke of the intense physical joy and pleasure when listening to or making music. Mildred exemplified those who found that music raised their spirits. She played the piano every day, 'because I love it and it helps to make me feel better. If I felt a little down or lonely, the piano will fix me. No, but you can feel more tired some days and if you don't know what to do, there's always the piano'. The informants spoke of music as being a self-administered therapy that provided comfort, distraction and relief.

Many of the informants found that music had a positive effect on their psychological state and brought beneficial change. Pam said that when she experienced pain, 'I hope that there is enough music in my brain to carry me through. If I'm at the dentist or the podiatrist that hurts, I think about music and I can endure. I mean it's not bad pain, but it's discomfort. It helps me in those situations too'. May concurred and said, 'It has a soothing effect. You're not aware that you're uptight or, you know, like screaming or whatever it might be. But the right piece of music makes an atmosphere and an attitude, and you change, I feel'. And Margot had a similar but technically-informed view: 'I won't say it's the *Valium* of my life, but being a pharmacist, I can talk in medical terms, it can change. It can change my whole day because I can feel pushed, rushed, tired. I can feel physically tired because I'm a very active person'.

Time, reality and escape

Many informants used music to provide structure in their daily lives. June listened to music on the radio during the morning and on compact discs in the afternoon. Six informants played the piano regularly, and five spent much of their time listening to, preparing and presenting community radio programmes. Frank enjoyed preparing concert and radio programmes and, like four others, made music with friends. Bob listened to music and presented community classes. Many others said that playing recordings and listening to music as an accompaniment to daily activities made them more enjoyable.

Another reason why many of the informants were attracted to and enjoyed music was that it provided 'imaginative play', fantasy and escape from everyday living. Directly or through its thought-associations, music

allowed them to become lost in thought and to escape reality and time. Several informants recounted that they used music to assist in pain management, to avoid loneliness, or just to be lost in abstract thought. For instance, Pam and Phil found that listening or playing music took their minds off their physical conditions. Pam's comment was that, 'I guess it takes my mind off the physical circumstances and I can go into the state where I'm listening and thinking about music'; while Phil said, 'Because I think that if you're involved in playing or even listening to music, you're not thinking about your personal worries or ailments. It takes away that if you like'. For Peter too, music stimulated imaginative thought and fantasy, particularly Wagner's dramatic and many unresolved musical lines:

Music has a very powerful imaginative potential. I was listening to the *Lohengrin* of Wagner ... it makes me feel physically ill, and it's a very interesting question of why that is so. ... I think it has to do with the fact that it arouses within one – because of the extreme dramaticism, lack of resolution and so forth – it arouses within one all sorts of sub-conscious awareness that normally don't come up to the surface at all. And I think the lack of resolution in particular is a disturbing thing because it reminds one that life itself is full of unresolved situations. ... I'm not particularly fond of Wagner's music but ... it has these very powerful effects on the imagination. Even if one were not to know the story behind it, the sheer force and power of the various motives and the way Wagner treats them, it can't help but call up normally buried aspects of the imagination.

Patricia was also drawn to music's abstract qualities and how it could be used as an escape. She said, 'Bach's music, for instance, attracts me tremendously because of it's sort of mathematical precision and the polyphony and so on, and I guess I like that because it's the clear line and this is a bit like 18th century architecture in a way'. For James, music provided an escape into a world devoid of social injustice and violence: 'As a person in my sixties, and I'm a sensitive person, I am extremely upset that there's so much violence – that I suppose has always gone on and I have not had time to notice it – now I have but at least in the arts you can escape from the evils of society as much as possible'.

Spirituality

Jane stated that when listening to music she felt a sense of timelessness. By listening to music, she was uplifted and totally engaged in the musical work:

Well, it's different ... getting pleasure from a concert or any music. This I think you would term spiritual actually because I think it's the area, the soaring feelings, the feeling of timelessness, it's being there and you're in the most incredible building, how on earth was it built? The whole thing comes together and this wonderful sound. It is really, really exciting; not exciting so much as uplifting, I suppose. I can't think of another word for it really.

Elizabeth, like many other informants, felt that there was a common link between her experience of music and her understanding and experience of spirituality. The experience of music for Elizabeth was much deeper than pleasure, distraction or intellectual interest. She also asserted that people with a deep interest in music tended to be more spiritually aware:

I think that the idea of sound is at a much deeper level and I think this is exemplified by the fact that people speak of music as being imperial. So somehow intuitively they recognise a connection between what is spiritual and what is musical. My observation, having mixed with hundreds of people over the last 20 years, is that particularly those who are musically interested, perhaps, are usually people with a very wide broad spiritual base to their personality.

Bob expressed similar views: ‘Music can add that extra dimension because we live in a world of reality and I think at times we need music to lift us out of the mundanity of reality to realise of course there is a spiritual life beyond what is the mere physical and the mere visible. We need to be able to have something that will add that extra edge, as it were, that extra sharpness to the soul that one particularly has, and music can add that from time to time’. Music provided many informants with a sense of spirituality that otherwise they would have found difficult to access, and for others it was a complement to a meditative state of mind. Thus, the experience of music for many of the informants was to know a sense of spirituality, a way of connecting with a sense of spirituality, or a way to enhance their knowledge and understanding of it.

The descriptions of this experience were as varied as their definitions of spirituality. It is interesting to note that several who did not see themselves as religious or spiritual believed that music brought them closest to an understanding and experience of spirituality. For example, Joan said that ‘music is about connecting with people, yes, but [also] moving into a different world and a bigger world and a world of the spirit to some extent and [into] your emotions’. Another informant, Jane, said:

I don’t have a religion as such. I don’t have the belief system and I believe sort of probably in the Ten Commandments, this sort of thing, but that I don’t know. But I think the music is a lifting experience. It’s a spiritual experience, which does take you out onto another level, let’s put it that way, which nothing else will: it’s transcendental.

Conclusion

The experience of music for many of the participants was intensely personal and ‘located in its function as a social symbol’ (Shepherd 1991: 13).

This is because music provided the participants with ways of knowing and being in the world and of understanding emotions, *self*, others and spirituality. The meaning of music was closely related to the participants' sense of *self* and identity, and to how they experienced emotions, communicated feelings and emotions to others, and ultimately used music as a medium to improve their wellbeing. This study has shown that music, alongside its physical stimulation contained subjective significance and meaning for the informants. Music facilitated the construction of meaning in the participants' lives. The meaning appears to be directly related to life experiences and emotional needs.

It has been shown that understanding these subjective meanings and interpretations can shed important insights into how people live and interact in the world. More importantly, by studying the subjective experiences of the meaning of music we gain insights into the person's *self*. Music can connect an older person to others who may no longer be living, and may also validate memories, give meaning to life, and bring a greater sense of spirituality. Clair (1996) noted that reminiscence can help a person adapt to change, deal with stress and validate one's life. It can be used to boost self-esteem, to evaluate quality of life and to enable a person to draw upon personal strengths. The informants reminded the researchers that, when they listened to particular pieces of music, they vividly recalled events and experiences in life. They revealed clear examples of how music was used to link and review their life experiences and its meanings, and the importance of 'this gift' in their life.

The findings have also revealed that music provides a way for people to explore who they are and express themselves to others. Further studies are needed to elaborate the ways in which music is used throughout the life span to interpret emotions, experiences, interactions with people and a sense of identity. Particularly required is a better understanding of how music can provide sociological insights into what social purposes it serves as a feature of human agency. For example, do different types of music appeal to certain groups of people, and is it used by these groups to reinforce and validate their world-views? Are there differences between how different cultures use music so that people can make connections with themselves and others, and what is the significance of the differences or similarities found between cultures in the use of various types of music? As Martin (1995) argued, the meaning of music is not entirely arbitrary or individual, but influenced by the symbolic communication found in society. This suggests that in addition to understanding the individual meaning and experience people give to music – the focus of this study – other studies are required to understand how music serves as a structural and social construct

representation, and how it is embedded in cultural assumptions and social meanings.

The study also suggests that music can be a type of 'self-therapy' used to maintain 'a balance' in life. The informants spoke about how music made them feel more 'whole', 'in tune' and 'competent'. They also spoke of music providing them with a sense of 'inner contentment' and 'inner peace'. These descriptors highlight the profound psychological impact that music had on the participants. While recognising that further research is required to identify what factors make music making or listening a positive or a negative experience, on the basis of the findings from this study, we conclude without qualification that musical activities provide *quality time* in older people's lives.

The distinctive contribution of this study is however that music is more than a therapeutic tool, and can be a symbolic and meaningful medium for promoting wellness. For older people, it is possible to use it as a vehicle to provide continuity and meaning in their life. For health practitioners, it is an opportunity to use music to achieve (in the symbolic interaction term) *verstehen*, a better understanding of the subjective experiences of older people. Music can also be used to connect older people to others and social life. It was not surprising, therefore, that participants made statements like 'music seriously affects our lives'. This is because music provides people with ways of knowing themselves, others and the world in which they live. Music is a powerful symbol for how people choose to live their life, to assign meaning to experiences, and to act and react to his or her world.

It is important that we seek a better understanding of the genre or type of music that is most significant for older people and what roles, if any, their life experiences, social class and education play in their preferences. Large quantitative studies are required to describe the extent and frequency of the various functions that music plays in older people's lives and to understand the variations by gender, race, social class or educational background. As previously suggested, music is not always a positive experience. It can be used by a State as a form of political oppression, and it can have negative effects. Much has been written, for example, about young people's use of music to support suicidal thoughts (Scheel and Westfield 1999), and about the ways in which people use music therapy to help them work through grief and personal identity difficulties (Smeijester and Hurk 1999). This study has focused on the positive contribution of music, but others are required to ascertain its roles in promoting prejudice, stereotyping, sadness, violence or social isolation in later life, or to evoke negative feelings or behaviour. Content analysis of song lyrics would uncover the values, ideas, or messages they convey, and surveys of

violence or prejudice can try to determine whether there is any association between music and the formulation or validation of oppression against others.

The associational powers of music are directly related to the individual's assignment of meaning according to his or her own unique experiences. Blacking (1995) commented that music itself does not have extra-musical meaning unless the experience already exists in the individual's mind, and Jourdain (1997) suggested that when people bring their own life experiences into the context of the listening experience, it is music that idealises the emotions whether they be negative or positive. As a result, music reflects a person's emotional life. The results of this study confirm Juslin and Sloboda's (2001) view that the primary reason for people engaging with music is for personal experience. To end with an informant's words, Jane encapsulated both this motivation and people's personal, emotional, social and aesthetic attraction to music:

It's just incredible, I find it a totally emotional experience, when it's very, very good, and something very, very beautiful, and you've got a load of people involved in this getting to that. I just think it's ... one of the greatest experiences you can have. I think it's a very personal sort of thing though, in terms of how you feel about music. It's me!

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