

ESSAY | PEER REVIEWED

“Let Your Secrets Sing Out”: An Auto-Ethnographic Analysis on How Music Can Afford Recovery From Child Abuse

Georgina Lewis^{1*}

1 University of Exeter, United Kingdom

*g.h.lewis@exeter.ac.uk

Received: 30 November 2015 ; Accepted: 20 February 2017 ; Published: 1 July 2017

Editor: Helen Oosthuizen Reviewer: Amy Clementes-Cortes

Abstract

There is extensive literature documenting that music can enable recovery and healing through various means such as performance and memory-work. However, an understanding of ‘how’ music achieves this is less clear. A combination of academic enquiry and reflective writing from a survivor who uses music to recover offers a compelling perspective on music’s functions and abilities. This article explores how music affords recovery following the chronological timeline of an abuse survivor’s own recovery, and this chronology is presented through four main phases. As a communication device, music can initiate disclosures and expression of trauma. Music can also ground a survivor into the present and thus allow recovery to be manageable. Music can create a safe space through its various qualities; crucially – the musical use of boundaries and in this space recovery can occur. Finally, music can afford the development and maintenance of safe attachments and an understanding of worth, fostering healing from the damage inflicted from abuse. These themes together provide a unique perspective and understanding of how music can afford recovery.

Keywords: *trauma, child abuse, recovery, affordance, reflexivity, healing*

Introduction

Let me hear the songs of the silence that you captured...Let your secrets sing out. (*Songs from the Ashes*, Appendix 1, see supplemental files)

Music can afford healing from traumatic events through means such as song-writing (Day, Baker, & Darlington, 2009; Rolvsjord, 2010), rhythm (Koen, Lloyd, Barz, & Brummel-Smith, 2008), and enabling memory work (Wigram, Pedersen, & Bonde, 2002). Memory work in this context may be the process of exploring and reconciling with memories, and developing methods of managing invasive memories in present life (Roy, 1998). The affordances of music can work within daily lives (NBC News, 2013) and also within the music therapy setting (Koen et al., 2008). It seems evident then that music can be healing and potentially transformative. But, there is a need to understand *how* music can afford recovery (Koen et al., 2008) and this essay will tentatively begin answering this question from the personal view of a survivor of abuse.

Storr (1997) noted that music can be transformative for our emotions and even existence – indeed he likened this transformative experience to being in love. Further, Storr explained how a person's sound is an expression of their current emotion, fosters a type of social bonding, and perhaps provides a “mnemonic framework” in which one can express the “structure of their knowledge and social relations” (p.19). Both Rolvsjord (2010) and DeNora (2000) explained that music can be resourceful within one's normal, daily life. Unlike in standard therapy, music can explore and enable a person's strengths as much as their trauma and pain. DeNora (2000) explored the role of music as a communicative device, a concept also discussed by Rolvsjord (2010). For example, Rolvsjord described the case of a woman named ‘Maria’ who expressed anger in music and her voice changed in accordance with the emotions she was feeling. DeNora (2000) and Budd (1985) explored and supported this notion of music being a method of expressing emotion. Rigoni (2009) explored the notion of ‘grounding’ – that of strategically removing oneself away from emotional pain, which can be fundamental to a person's wellbeing when trying to recover from trauma. Musically, there are manners in which to achieve this. Storr (1997) stated that one's assimilation with the setting and world around them is closely linked to one's hearing – in this sense a person could use their ability to hear in order to balance them in their present world, by turning music on for example.

Music as a starting point offers a relevant and complex space in which trauma recovery can potentially happen. Trauma, such as child abuse, can have long term effects on survivors – including symptoms such as emotional distress, post-traumatic distress such as flashbacks and a damaged sense of self, difficulties with relationships, and cognitive difficulties (Briere & Elliot, 1994; Good & Hinton, 2016). As such, music has qualities and abilities that may be healing to the traumatised person.

Whilst there are interviews with service users (Rolvsjord, 2010) and considerable literature on what music does (DeNora, 2000, 2013; Rogers, 1993; Storr, 1997) a gap seems to be the analytical voice of a survivor who has been restored through music. There are very few personal, auto-ethnographic accounts of these experiences in the research field. This piece is framed as an auto-ethnography, supported by literature throughout. This use of auto-ethnography combined with academic understanding grants me access that may otherwise have been unethical or challenging to achieve in other methods of enquiry. It is not distressing for me to reflect deeply on my own recovery and music's key role within that. I know what topics would be too painful for me, and fundamentally it would be extremely difficult for me to therefore inadvertently push myself too far. In an interview with abuse survivors, there lie risks – of triggering memories or of the interviewee becoming distressed. Whilst interviews provide depth (Mason, 2002), with this particular topic understanding how ‘deep’ is appropriate or safe to explore is difficult (Rolvsjord, 2010). I am in the unique and privileged position of being survivor, musician, and academic student. This grants me the ability to analyse how music can afford recovery in the academic sense, entwined with a deep insight as a reflective survivor. Whilst I may have my own biases and subjectivity that may not support experiences of other survivors, this personal exploration nonetheless adds a unique depth to the research in this area.

Methodology

This article does not follow the traditional conventions of academic enquiry in that it is not aiming to be a piece of empirical research, but rather a uniquely grounded insight into the role music can play in recovery. As this insight is from my own reflective perspective, it does not attempt to pose as an objectively measurable piece of social science but rather takes advantage of the profound depth that may emerge from emotional engagement with the study focus (Bhatia, 2014). Emotions in themselves are signals as to the reality of a person and guide us in our reflective work (Bhatia, 2014). The aim is to offer a unique viewpoint and comprehension that academics and profes-

sionals within the field may wish to build on or explore further in their own empirical work.

In organizing this essay, I first ‘mapped’ out my recovery. Where did I start, where did that develop, and where am I now? I had to understand my recovery story and from that reflect on where music featured, and from there develop relevant themes to organize this essay. The following four themes will include reference to my personal experiences, substantiated by relevant literature.

1. Music as a Communicative Device

In terms of recovery, I first had to remember the repressed memories of the abuse and then find the courage and manner in which to communicate these memories.

Thus, the initial idea of this essay is exploring music as a communication device, understanding music’s role in memory (DeNora, 2000; Koen et al., 2008), and then its symbolic and critical affordance in communication (Rolvsjord, 2010; Sacks, 2007).

2. Music as a Grounding Tool

Following my recovery experience, once I had remembered and started to talk, I needed to find coping strategies and ways in which to still function in my daily life whilst managing the distressing and often traumatic, memory recovery process. When trying to manage my recovery, I often talked about “grounding” myself. Rigoni (2009) described the process of grounding as finding a balance in our conscious state. For me this meant finding methods of holding myself in the present and not allowing the past to overwhelm me. For example, I needed to be able to prevent intrusive memories or flashbacks (an intense form of remembering in which a person may re-live a traumatic experience) from constantly imposing on my daily life. Such methods included turning music on to drown out the sounds of memories, counting the number of ‘yellow’ items in a room in order to refocus my vision, or following mindfulness techniques to soothe. Mindfulness (Bearance, 2014) is a form of grounding, a method in which one is “fully aware in the present moment” (p. 60). Fundamentally, this prevents the past (or indeed the future) from overwhelming the current present state.

I therefore analyse in this section how music helped ground me as a refuge from chaos (Storr, 1997) or as a form of reconciliation with my past and present self (DeNora, 2000). I explore how I feel music is more complex than that of a device holding us in a set emotional place; it is a metaphorical ‘anchor’, (Wigram et al., 2002) but it can also be something more elaborate than this. I conclude exploring how this experience of grounding through music guided me towards an experience of safety.

3. Musical Space

Building on this concept of music affording safety, I develop the third theme – musical space – and analyse how musical boundaries foster a critical healing opportunity for the abuse survivor. After surviving trauma that inherently destroys and manipulates boundaries, music holds structure (Storr, 1997) and grants the user more ownership within their environment (DeNora, 2000). I explore how this allowed me to help regain the sense of loss after having my boundaries so violated.

4. Music to Afford Attachments

Finally, in my recovery, once I had worked to this point of the process – remembering, talking, coping, gaining control – I began to experience healing of my shattered ability to form and trust attachments and relationships with others, through music. In this theme I explore how the act of performing music can nurture attachments in a non-intimidating manner (Schutz, 1951), and how music afforded a new sense of social identity (Bunt, 1994). For me, this gradually soothed my emerging identity as an abuse survivor. Music enabled me to become aware of, and accept that, my body and soul are valuable (Rolvsjord, 2010) and with this new-found awareness, I was able to develop healthy attachments.

The literature I draw from offers a mixture between an understanding of musical features in their literal sense and how music can, in general, afford psychological well-being (Sacks, 2007; Storr, 1997; DeNora, 2000). The views of Rolvsjord (2010) are of pertinent value to this essay as her book is so largely focused on her role as a music therapist for two abuse survivors. Her professional analysis, alongside the interviews

with the young women, tied in closely and entwined with my own reflective insight. I now describe these four themes in more depth, paying particular attention to my own recovery and use of music.

Music as a communication device

The music expressed something that I could not bear the emotions of. (Rolvjord, 2010, p. 163, quoting 'Emma').

Music and traumatic recall

One may assume that a starting point in recovery is being able to disclose the trauma, but for me the journey started before that. I needed to remember. Following the trauma, the vast majority of my memories were repressed. The repression was a tool for survival, allowing me to function and store the memories until I was safe enough to manage them. This repression is also known as dissociation (Mind UK, 2013).

Music was a key component in granting me my memory, which supports the research highlighting how music triggers images and memories (Koen et al., 2008). This 'trigger' effect of music can be used as a tool in music therapy (Bunt, 1994). Many of us can relate to the notion of hearing a song from years ago and it triggering a memory of some kind (DeNora, 2000). For me, music offered a refuge in which I could deposit the memories as a child, and reclaim them safely as an adult. This use of a musical refuge was not a conscious act, but it was nonetheless invaluable.

I played steel drums throughout my teenage years, and in playing them again at University, I discovered my memories were waiting for me. The mere sound of a steel drum could be enough for a traumatic memory to start its ascent as it was a sound so strongly associated with my childhood. I learned that how I played indicated what kind of memory would surface next; sad and gentle related to grief, whilst loud and dissonant indicated fear or anger. If I stared at the drum and suddenly could not remember how to play, then I was aware that the memory would be of my younger years before I had started playing the steel drums. The drums became a voice for me when I had not yet managed to comprehend or even remember the words. The drums symbolised my childhood, and carried some of it, and this symbolisation of instruments allowed me to start expressing myself, similar to how an abused girl, described by Rogers (1993), expressed her feelings towards her parents through instrumental symbolism. The drums not only enabled some memories to surface but also made me consciously aware that music helped me and that music is everywhere. With the safe knowledge of music being a permanent and consistent feature, I dared to recover.

Emma, a young girl described by Rolvsjord (2010) was enabled by her own songs to manage her memories and sometimes listened to her songs to remind her of the events she had survived. It is important that individuals can make sense of their traumatic story, as this allows physical and psychological processing and healing to take place (Schick, 2011). As my memory started to return, and feeling safe within the music setting, I found the courage to try speaking.

Music to express, represent, and verbalise.

The abusers' forbade me to talk as a child – to disclose the abuse. Not only was I forbidden, I was firmly convinced that my voice was "disgusting" and nobody wanted to hear me anyway. As such, both during the abuse and afterwards as I started my recovery journey, I spoke quietly, felt ashamed of exposing my voice, and later found a comfort in singing whilst playing piano. "Music cannot be hurt" (Bunt, 1994, p. 97). This notion was a fundamental value in my own experience, in making my first disclosure to a piano. I could not traumatise a piano or bring harm to it with my memories. Equally I could not be scolded for my tears nor punished for my openness, and as DeNora (2000) stated, self-expression enables moving forwards, which certainly rang true for me. Rolvsjord (2010) worked with Emma, whose abusive father had called her

voice “ugly”, and she had reduced her singing voice in response to this (p. 127). Like Emma, I had to manage singing before I could verbalise the abuse properly. Rolvsjord (2010) was acutely aware of the importance of Emma finding her voice, to be finally heard (p. 127). Just as Emma wrote a song and shared it with staff, I wrote “Broken” and shared it with my music lecturer (Appendix 1, see supplemental files). Emma, and I, were both finding a safe method in which our silence could finally start breaking - a trusted device (music) given to a trusted person.

The voice is in some ways the most raw and ‘naked’ instrument (Wigram et al., 2002, p. 210). I argue that to express intimate trauma in a safely ‘naked’ fashion is a unique healing possibility that singing offers. Through singing I learned that exposure did not result consistently with abuse, but conversely could result in empowerment.

Furthermore, music can afford feelings of “grief and pain” whilst simultaneously affording relief and comfort (Sacks, 2007, p. 301). Music can therefore be paradoxical. Trauma is inherently perverse; an experience that is the opposite of expectation and desire—repressing memories to cope but in that, losing coherent narrative for example, or the conflict in victim and survivor identities (Fisher, Howard, & Monteith, 2013). I argue that music, with its various effects and functions, allows the space for a paradoxical event(s) to be expressed and processed.

With Emma (Rolvsjord, 2010), the music could articulate anger for her until she came to accept the anger was rightfully hers to feel. The music thus initiated emotion, safely contained it, and became an ally holding some of the pain until she felt ready to own it. Similarly, music can cry for me. My experience is supported by that of Budd (B1985); I can pour out the power of emotion and perform it, which is especially useful when I feel too afraid to cry or to let my vulnerability become safely tangible. As DeNora (2000) suggested, it allows me to explore this vulnerability and make sense of where I am. Storr (1997) argued that dissonance in music is a musical plea for a resolution. My music contains many dissonances and this holds many searches for a sense of resolve and closure. This resolution never happens until I find the words to convey that closure; the music and lyrics work in a partnership, guided by my memories. Suddenly my memories are a leader, not an enemy. Descending piano lines communicate my tears, my voice can be grainy with pain or pure with strength, and volume is used to articulate the extremity of my emotions.

My song writing is more than revealing a story. My composing is, as supported by Storr (1997, p. 75), establishing a “new reality” that has developed from my narrative – a reality in which I am not only able to feel, but I am *allowed* to feel. Music fundamentally granted me my right to cry and communicate those tears but equally my right to feel love and happiness. Unlike standard therapy, the focus in music does not have to always be towards the damage or alternatively the strength; it can be both (Rolvsjord, 2010; Sacks, 2007). In allowing me to own my emotions, music afforded my humanity and courage. Emma discussed music letting her “dare” to show her whole self, to “dare” to process and understand “both sides” of her. She dares to feel loneliness, a wish to die, and equally to feel strength (Rolvsjord, 2010, p. 165). With music, I have dared to live and dared to be whole. Music has afforded the integration of all of me and ensures I recover as a whole being. When I write my songs, I am composing who I am, both internally to myself and externally to the outside world. As DeNora (2000, p. 63) indicated, music can be both the creation of and reconciliation with one’s own identity.

Music has the ability to communicate what is impossible or too painful to verbalise (Bunt, 1994; Rogers, 1993; Rolvsjord, 2010) which Emma and Maria discovered in writing their lyrics, despite confronting some harrowing topics (Rolvsjord, 2010). It is less frightening to convey memories and emotions through music than through just talking (Rolvsjord, 2010). My songs (Appendix 1, see supplemental files) allow me to convey words that may either be too difficult for me to speak, or too difficult for others to receive in the verbal medium. Music offers a bridge between worlds, an ability for people to hear me without distress, and for me to communicate some of the pain, journey, and strength, mingled with the elegance of music.

For me, music has been a beautiful means of disclosure, a method that ensures people not only *hear* me, but also *feel* me. Of course, like Emma (Rolvjord, 2010), I am reassured by the knowledge that people can translate a song how they wish, and indeed keep it simply as a song if that is more manageable. The disclosure is not forced upon them, and I can protect them and me with that.

Whatever pain I might be conveying, there is an endless undercurrent of musical grace; it is never wholly depressed even if I want it to be. Performing trauma in music allows the collision of a haunting beauty with pain - the communication perhaps of a thread of hope within the hurt. My song "The River" (Appendix 1, see supplemental files) communicated my wish to die, something that is especially difficult to do in the spoken word, but the song affords the entwined intimacy of singing with the vulnerability of my own life. Whilst the words are desperately sad, the piano has some stunning chords and melody lines. I knew then if I could write something beautiful then I could keep living - music provided me the chance to communicate to myself that whilst I was in pain, and had a right to feel and express it, I still had life in me. In the song, I lived safely within the paradox of expressing severe pain whilst realising my will to live. In his book, Sacks (2007) clearly depicted this musical enigma of experiencing pain whilst simultaneously establishing strength, that "whilst music makes one experience pain and grief more intensely, it brings solace and consolation at the same time" (p. 301). The use of verbs in this description is interesting; that music "makes" the experience of pain, as if music can be the creator of that experience, acting as an emotional force. However, it also "brings" consolation. It brings us the solution. It's as though music has the capacity to open one's mind and spirit to the pained emotions within them, but it does not neglect us and leave us alone with those emotions - it also soothes, reconciles and heals. I believe the paradox described exists due to music being both our creator of emotion, and solution for emotion. For me this rings true; the music made me truly feel the pain I was in, but it also brought me the chance to turn that pain into something hauntingly beautiful, and for that I lived.

Conversely, I can sing my songs "Don't Look Down" or "Freedom" (Appendix 1, see supplemental files) and ensure the world hears my strength; that I am not damaged beyond repair. Emma (Rolvjord, 2010) gave her songs to other practitioners to tell her story. Music is a practical method to share the narrative without having to completely re-live the trauma each time. I argue that music can become an advocate for the traumatised person, as it has done for me.

Performing my songs allows music to portray not only my story but that I am capable. I can write songs; I can sing on stage. It empowers me even if I am afraid. Music expresses not only trauma, but also the survival, the fear of that survival, and strength (Rolvjord, 2010). For me, it also offers a sense of relief. It communicates the contradictions and perversity of the abuse, whilst allowing a sense of connection and closure. Ultimately, music has the power to communicate all aspects of survivor-hood and recovery.

Music as a grounding tool

Music of the right kind can serve to orient and anchor a patient when nothing else can. (Sacks, 2007, p. 337).

After learning to communicate, I needed to learn how to function in recovery, one example being how to prevent the re-living of memories and emotions from entirely consuming my daily existence. I did not want to surrender my present to my past, however much I needed to process the memories. Finding the balance was difficult. Achieving a sense of balance is called 'grounding', and this can happen using various mechanisms. By grounding, this essay is using the definition of Rigoni (2009), an ability to exist between consciousness and an allowance of that conscious reality. DeNora (2000) emphasized that music "is both an instigator and a container of feeling" (2000, p. 58). Music can ground me by either holding the emotion or feeling until I am ready to ex-

plore it, or by initiating and processing the feeling based on whatever memory from my past is threatening my present space. It is not a dismissal of intrusive memories but a management of them. It is a way of preventing the past from overwhelming the present but without determining our past as of less importance. It is a way of engaging with our present consciousness whilst also *using* that involvement to manage the past.

An awareness of the movements and balances within one's body enhances well-being (Storr, 1997), thus is arguably a key to recovery— hence the importance of grounding. There is some debate over whether music is more purposeful for a refuge, or an adaptation to life (Storr, 1997). Storr examined how Schopenhauer viewed music as an escape from turbulences, whereas Nietzsche viewed music as an ability to “reconcile us with life rather than detach us from it.” (Storr, 1997, p.157). DeNora (2000) described how music can “frame or re- focus” (p. 97) our current reality so our struggles can diminish temporarily, and Wigram et al. (2002) found that to recognise music allowed a survivor to recognise some aspect of herself and connected her past to her present identity (2002, p. 190). I therefore argue that music does not have to be slotted firmly into either a ‘refuge’ or a ‘reconciliation’ box; it can be both. From this then, music can ground people either by allowing them to temporarily dissociate their current reality from a past that might feel overwhelming, or enabling them to associate the present with the past.

It is important to acknowledge the simple functions of music as well as the complex. At its most basic music can help overwrite other auditory stimuli (DeNora, 2000). If I am experiencing auditory flashbacks, in which I hear the memory but have no visual context, then I may ‘turn a song on’ either in my head or literally on my phone. I will either imagine it loud or turn it loud, and literally drown the auditory memory out. I focus on using the present music to keep me firmly rooted in my current reality, thus grounding me in the here and now. A melody can act as an “anchor” (Sacks, 2007; Wigram et al., 2002), but I would tentatively suggest that it is beyond a simple anchor. I find the concept of an anchor too permanent and too stationary. Grounding does not trap me or tie me down; it frees me and enables me. Therefore, using the same analogy, I argue that music is the wind that affects where the boat will sail – either to an established present, or to reconciliation with the past. Grounding does not lock me in one place as an anchor would; it moves me either away from memories when they may be intrusive to my present life, or towards memories when it is important to reflect upon and process what has happened. As Storr (1997) also indicated, music helps enable this process of moving with time.

Another manner in which music helps ground me is through its elements. I can listen to a new song and become fascinated by its structures, melody and patterns, learning the story behind the composer, and listening to the harmonies the music creates. As Sacks (2007) stated, listening to music is an active process. If I am actively involved in anything, then ultimately I am grounded in the present on some level; the past is not overwhelming me.

Finally, music can serve as a reminder of my safety. There was a period where if my friends sang a particular song (“Soduato” – Appendix 2, see supplemental files for score) to me when I was flashbacking, I appeared to calm down. We had sung this together safely in a choir. Somehow, if I heard the song whilst trapped in an unconscious memory, some part of my mind acknowledged that the song took part in another time, another reality. It so often felt like the hand reaching down to me and pulling me out of the traumatic depths; a link between my past and present and was inherently more powerful and effective if sung than if spoken. Even if I could not hear the words, the melody made its way and acted as a memory tool. As musical memory can survive after other memories have faded (Sacks, 2007), the sound of the safe melody grounded me almost immediately. The song itself is filled with polyphony, with individual parts working together to create a coherent and intricate piece; singing it always filled me with a sense of connection, because of the sense of disconnected parts working together to build a coherent whole. The memory of feeling connected in the song, to the music itself but also to others who could support me, grounded me on hearing the melody,

and even today, I will sometimes listen to the piece to aid my wellbeing. Music can be used in various ways to ground someone, then, and is a valuable asset for recovery, preventing the process of remembering from overwhelming the present (Bunt, 1994).

Musical space

Music structures time. (Storr, 1997, p. 30)

It has been important for me to find means of establishing boundaries – my own boundaries as a child were either absent or violated, and as part of recovery it is therefore crucial that I resolve this loss. Music has played an essential part in achieving this.

Trauma is chaotic, and music, if nothing else, has helped me stabilise this chaos, a concept also explored by Storr (1997, p. 64) who stated that musical “systems are ways of ordering sound.” It has been through my use of musical structure, and understanding the rules within musical composition and systems, that I have been able to reconcile with some of my more traumatised parts and hold some of my chaotic emotions during recovery. I wrote “Ghosts in Mirrors” (Appendix 1, see supplemental files) at a point in my life of great disconnect and turbulence, with the absolute sense of being pulled between worlds. I spent a lot of time with the sensation of floating, of being almost invisible, and at times no longer recognised my reflection in a mirror. I identified simultaneously as a frightened child, a stressed student, and an empowered survivor, and I had not quite managed to sit with these entirely different states simultaneously. The result was a sense of having lost control, something that terrified me, as there were times where this indicated danger to the traumatised parts of me. At that point, I accepted I needed to find a way to gain control of this chaos to prevent me from becoming engulfed. Bunt (1994, p. 38) noted that composing can act as a defensive strategy against feeling “overwhelmed.” I therefore chose songwriting, and wrote “Ghosts in Mirrors” (Appendix 1, see supplemental files). The various parts of me presented themselves in my voice; no matter how hard I tried, I could not open the song with a strong adult voice - the little girl needed to be heard and the survivor did not appear until well into the second half of the piece. I recorded it with other student musicians, establishing my role as a student, and on hearing the recording, I finally felt like the chaos in this particular moment of my life had been treated with care and resolved.

There is structure in music with rules and ways to bend the structure (Storr, 1997), and there can be consistency and repetition (Sacks, 2007), which for my sometimes-frightened mind was and still can be very reassuring. The crucial aspect for me is what researchers described as the boundaries within music (Bunt, 1994; Wigram et al., 2002). Music works within a time frame. If I write a 5-minute song, the emotions and memory are contained within those 5 minutes. These can only be accessed if either in a musical space or via headphones (if recorded), and even then, it is my *choice*, a concept which I had little access to as a child. I can walk away from the music room and leave the chaos there, having put the turmoil into a coherent piece of music. I am allowed to express disorder in music; it is safe and interesting for the listener to experience (Storr, 1997). I can experiment with dissonances; I can hang in the silence or fill the space with sound. I can fill the piece with sequences or not, and I have entire control of the environment in which I am a part (DeNora, 2000). Ultimately, the piano cannot play itself – it is up to me if that chaos is going to be explored *within that structured space* or not. I set the rules, and music sets the boundaries in space.

In my world where boundaries had been dangerous and violated, music afforded the ability to practice my own boundaries and to learn the safety and refuge that comes from such processes. Fundamentally, music not only helped me realise and understand my rights that had been previously robbed, but held my emotions within a safe space whilst I processed the trauma. When I first started songwriting, I stuck rigidly to musical rules. My former abused self had fought hard to gain a sense of control, something I still carry with me because of the abuse, and discovering I could find control

and safe boundaries through music felt especially precious. I was frightened to break or lose these boundaries. Further, key to my survival when younger was adhering to the abusers' rules, and as such I developed a fear of breaking rules. Therefore, musical rules were of huge importance to my fragile emerging survivor-self. Now, I like to experiment; to see how far I can go with musical boundaries and still feel safe. I enjoy realizing that breaking or playing with musical rules does not result in danger, but quite often something rather beautiful and unique. Music affords my learning that I can explore more, safely, whilst still having the boundaries of musical form, structure, and time to hold me when necessary.

Finally, it would seem sometimes that even my body becomes aware of the safe boundaries within music and conforms to this safety. Whereas I can write and say the word 'rape', I have never yet been able to sing the word in a song. If I go to sing it, my body physically stops me; my voice closes up, no sound will come out, and my hands will stop playing the piano. In this sense, music helps me to recognise my limits – that to sing such a word may enable a deeper emotional connection than I am able to handle, and therefore not to cross this threshold. Ultimately, music keeps me safe, and my mind and body have learned to trust it and respond appropriately to its boundaries.

Personally, this sense of developing, understanding, and utilizing musical boundaries has over time allowed me to recover a better sense of boundaries outside of the musical space. Over the last 5 years especially, in which I was more involved in musical groups and music-making than ever, I have established a greater sense of personal respect and ability to recognise and adhere to my own limits, as well as understand and respect those of others around me. Whereas I used to be a very submissive person, unable to recognise my right to say 'no' (even in situations such as being asked to do some work as a favour when my workload was already unmanageable) I am now much better at establishing my own healthy boundaries and space. Whilst it would be naïve to entirely place music as responsible for this aspect of healing and ignore other aspects of recovery (such as psychotherapy, actually being safe, and developing a strong support network), music has nonetheless played a critical role. My boundaries started healing before I began therapy, for example, but in accordance with how strongly music featured in my life. Whilst I do have a strong support network, a lot of this came from friends I made in the music groups and the sense of empathy and bonding I had developed with them through music. It seems clear to me that music and its qualities have played a fundamental role in my development of healthy boundaries, which enabled me to put measures in place to establish my safety, and develop strong friendships that supported me throughout my recovery. Music was, and is, essential.

Music to form attachments

The processes inherent in musical interaction are strong antidotes to the inhuman experiences of torture, helping the clients to connect with the core of their humanity and establish connections with other people. (Zharinova-Sanderson, 2004, p. 241)

Learning to trust again was a key aspect of my recovery, and indeed at times learning to believe in blind trust – a terrifying prospect given the unpredictability of it – was essential if I was to recover. I had to trust acquaintances, or professional strangers such as therapists not to harm me if I made a disclosure. At times of dissociative amnesia (Mind UK, 2013) where I entirely forgot the identity of my friends, I had to blindly trust in their word when they assured me – as strangers – that they would not abuse me in this house I no longer recognised (my home). My friends are fellow musicians; we have sung, played, stressed, and celebrated together as musicians. I fully believe that these shared experiences allowed some part of my mind to have blind faith in them until my memory returned.

There are 'human' aspects to music itself, for example the ability for emotional agitation to be represented musically through tempo, accents, trills, and pitch (Budd, 1985, p. 46). Secondly, in order to connect with and understand a new piece of music,

one requires a degree of empathy (Storr, 1997). If one becomes more familiar with a piece and can recognise its patterns and relationship between notes and parts, then one stands a greater chance to understand it and perform it as the composer intended it to be performed, which I would argue is a safe attachment to create. I certainly was never aware of the attachments I made with pieces of music, but in hindsight can see that there was always some form of attachment to the composer. When I performed a piece, I did not want to feel alienated from it – from a musician’s perspective I simply did not want that stress – and in order to understand the purpose and use of the notes, I had to engage emotionally within the piece to try and understand the composer’s written intentions.

Throughout my life, where attachments could be dangerous or used against me, my attachment with music remained consistent and reliable. This is not to say I view music in the way I would a friend or partner. I simply view music as providing me with a sense of empathy and understanding. Music provides me the chance to speak, and in turn, I listen to music and to what other composers are trying to say. In any musical environment then, I am intrinsically more empathetic and aware of musicians around me and this fosters attachments. Schutz (1951) described the simultaneous consciousness of orchestral players; how members of an orchestra are at any one time reading their score, observing the conductor, and unconsciously taking in the body language of those around them in order to work with the musicians near them. This allows the orchestra to perform as a whole, not as many individuals creating a sound, and ultimately builds attachments.

When performing or rehearsing together, people are in sync physiologically (Schutz, 1951; Storr, 1997). I stand in a choir and collectively we not only create sound, we work with the conductor to create an almost unconscious pulse. Our breathing syncs to allow flow within the music (or indeed, in some pieces we stagger breathing for the same effect), and the phrasing of our words relate not simply to the notated score, but to the movement of the conductor. Our bodies are working together: singer, instrumentalist, and conductor establishing physical harmony through the music to develop and achieve the quality performance. Whilst the primary goal here may not be to form attachments, it nonetheless is a result. Working together musically and physically develops a sense of belonging and group identity (Bunt, 1994). For anyone this is surely advantageous, as feeling a human attachment and connection to others is an innate desire (Brandell & Ringel, 2007). Traumatized people have been known to struggle with isolation and attachments (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2014), and thus making music may be a crucial component in establishing worth and value (Stige, 2004).

Personally, singing in a choir, the acts of working with singers to overcome difficult passages, growing to understand the body language of a conductor and my role within the music, have all been intrinsically healing. I may not have consciously realised at the time, but each time I sang with my friends, or discussed the music with the conductor, I learned that my person was *beyond* being objectified and used, as the abusers had led me to believe. My worth was affirmed and my own awareness of my worth grew. I had value as an alto singer; the contribution of my *voice* was appreciated, and my friendship within the group was meaningful, just as was the case with a group of isolated homeless men described by Davidson (2004), who found worth and a reason to live when singing in a group choir. From singing with people who were once strangers, I came to realise their security and develop strong friendships, which have been critical to my recovery.

Music was a space in which I could address attachment trauma without consciously focusing on the trauma itself. Collaboration implies a sense of equality (Rolvsvjord, 2010), so to be part of a collective music project allowed me to feel equal with those around me. This was critical, as the abuse had diminished my sense of worth so greatly. Furthermore, in working mutually with my fellow musicians, I inadvertently learned to trust properly again. People recovering from trauma seem able to recognise the humanity in others when taking part in a musical activity (Zharinova-Sanderson, 2004) and making music with people can allow the person to alter how they view

themselves and others. Through music, I learned that not everyone was dangerous, that everyone – including me – was of equal value, and that even my body was worth something. It is in the musical setting that I formed attachments and from that could recover.

Conclusion

Music can facilitate recovery following traumatic life events (Koen et al., 2008; Rogers, 1993; Rolvsjord, 2010;) and this essay has attempted to reflect on how music affords recovery, using an entwined mixture of auto-ethnography supported by relevant literature.

I have briefly described how music can be safe, can establish attachments, aid grounding, and is a communication device. In this way, I have explored how these functions within music can afford recovery. Music can be an advocate, an ally able to hold and contain disturbing and painful emotions and memories. Through its symbolism, elements and abilities, music can motivate fostering attachments with others, allow trauma to be safely disclosed, and encourage a victim to realise their rights.

Further research is needed, with more in-depth analysis of these topics, as well as further topics such as the use of music and rhythm in empowering those who have experienced trauma with their bodily healing (Bunt, 1994; DeNora, 2000; Koen et al., 2008; Storr, 1997). It would be valuable to offer more opportunities for survivors to speak and provide the insight that other methods may not have guaranteed or safe access to. An interesting starting point from here could in fact be discourse analysis of survivors' songs (Rolvsjord, 2010; Appendix 1, see supplemental files) to increase understanding of how people articulate the various complex aspects of trauma through music. What are consistent themes and imagery in songs written by abuse survivors, what do these themes mean, and how does music enable the expression of that meaning safely and powerfully? There is the opportunity not only to provide practitioners and researchers with greater depth and understanding, thus helping and equipping those they work with, but also perhaps something greater. There is the chance to allow the voices of those once threatened into silence, to reach those who are still silenced, and show them that they too have a voice worth hearing, that recovery from their trauma is possible. Music can help heal them, releasing their burden and letting their secrets sing out. Through articles such as this one, there is greater scope for music to provide more abuse survivors with a voice, with recovery, with freedom, and with the chance to be understood and heard.

References

- Bearance, D. (2014). Mindfulness in moments of crisis. *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de la Pensée Éducative*, 47(1/2), 60-70.
- Bhatia, M. (2014). Researching “bogus” asylum seekers, “illegal” migrants and “cimmigrants”. In K. Lumsden & A. Winter (Eds.), *Reflexivity in criminological research experiences with the powerful and the powerless* (pp. 162-177). Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781137379405>.
- Brandell, J., & Ringel, S. (2007). *Attachment and dynamic practice: An integrative guide for social workers and other clinicians*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Briere, J. N., & Elliott, D. M. (1994). Immediate and long-term impacts of child sexual abuse. *The Future of Children*, 4(2), 54-69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1602523>.
- Budd, M. (1985). *Music and the emotions*. London, UK: Routledge. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203420218>.
- Bunt, L. (1994). *Music therapy: An art beyond words*. London, UK: Routledge. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203359716>.

- Davidson, J. (2004). What can the social psychology of music offer community music therapy? In M. Pavlicevic & G. Ansdell (Eds.), *Community music therapy* (pp. 114-131). London: Jessica Kingsley.
- Day, T., Baker, F., & Darlington, Y. (2009). Experiences of song writing in a group programme for mothers who had experienced childhood abuse. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 18(2), 133-149, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08098130903062405>.
- DeNora, T. (2000). *Music in everyday life*. UK: Cambridge University Press. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511489433>.
- DeNora, T. (2013). *Music Asylums: Wellbeing Through Music in Everyday Life*. UK: Ashgate Publishing.
- Fisher, R., Howard, L., & Monteith, K. (2013). Speaking the unspeakable. *Inter-disciplinary Press*, Retrieved from, https://www.interdisciplinarypress.net/images/stories/IDP/hard_copy/Speaking_Introduction.pdf.
- Good, B. J., & Hinton, D. E. (2016). Introduction: Culture, trauma and PTSD. In B. J. Good & D. E. Hinton (Eds.), *Culture and PTSD: Trauma in global and historical perspective* (pp. 3-49). Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Koen, B. D., Lloyd, J., Barz, G., & Brummel-Smith, K. (2008). *The Oxford handbook of medical ethnomusicology*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Mind UK. (2013). Dissociative disorders. Retrieved from: http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/dissociative-disorders/#.VRlgDfnF_Pm
- NBC News (2013). Soldier hard – Music therapy for PTSD troops.[video online]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nxk4Vu4Llbg>
- Rigoni, M. (2009). Grounding techniques explained. *Behavioural Health Resources*, Retrieved from, <http://www.bcbhr.org/Articles.aspx?7>.
- Rogers, P. (1993). Research in music therapy with sexually abused clients. In H. Payne (Ed.), *Handbook of inquiry in the arts therapies: One river, many currents* (pp. 197-218). Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Rolvjord, R. (2010). *Resource-orientated music therapy in mental health care*. Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers.
- Roy, R. (1998). *Childhood abuse and chronic pain*. London, Ontario: University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442672932>.
- Sacks, O. (2007). *Musophilia: Tales of music and the brain*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House.
- Schick, K. (2011). Acting out and working through: Trauma and (in)security. *Review of International Studies*, 37(4), 1837-1855, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0260210510001130>.
- Schutz, A. (1951). Making music together: A study in social relationship. *Social Research*, 18(1), 76-97.
- Stige, B. (2004). Community music therapy: Culture, care and welfare. In M. Pavlicevic & G. Ansdell (Eds.), *Community music therapy* (pp. 91-114). London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Storr, A. (1997). *Music and the mind*. York, NY: Ballantine Books, Random House.
- U.S Department of Veterans Affairs. (2014). PTSD: National Center for PTSD. DSM-5 Criteria for PTSD.[online]. Retrieved from http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSDoverview/dsm5_criteria_ptsd.asp
- Wigram, T., Pederson, I. N., & Bonde, L. O. (2002). *A comprehensive guide to music therapy*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Zharinova-Sanderson, O. (2004). Promoting integration and socio-cultural change: Community music therapy with traumatised refugees in Berlin. In M. Pavlicevic & G. Ansdell (Eds.), *Community music therapy*. London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.