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# A Daseinsanalytic Perspective on Music Therapy

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## Abstract

This article explores a different approach to music therapy. An alternative perspective can be found in Daseinsanalysis, which draws on the existential foundations of Martin Heidegger's philosophy. The concept of Daseinsanalysis highlights the importance of being present and remaining open throughout the therapeutic process. Although this way of thinking about therapeutic being is not new in music therapy, it offers fresh perspectives on the notions of presence and being that music therapy can provide. This article introduces Daseinsanalysis, a therapeutic approach grounded in Martin Heidegger's philosophy, in the context of music therapy. Simply put, Daseinsanalysis is about different ways of perceiving individuals in therapy. This existentialist approach is not about diagnosis or techniques; rather, it focuses on perceiving a person in the world, emphasizing humanity, authenticity, and the unique connection music can offer. In my work with children with autism and ADHD, this approach helps me see them as whole individuals, not mere collections of symptoms. Daseinsanalysis is not about finding suitable techniques for changing behavior; it is about a holistic perception of people in the world, authenticity, and openness, and aims to find genuine relationships and deep bonds. In music therapy, Daseinsanalysis can open new ways of perceiving individuals undergoing therapy.

**Keywords:** Daseinsanalysis, music therapy, therapeutic presence, existential perspective, phenomenology, autism, ADHD

## Introduction

The theory of music therapy can either draw on various psychotherapeutic approaches, or develop its own methods (Bruscia, 2014). Some psychotherapeutic approaches work with


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the body, relationships, or sociocultural aspects. Existentialism, on the other hand, offers a unique perspective on how individuals are perceived in therapy.

Existential and phenomenological perspectives are not new in music therapy. For example, Pfeifer (2021) explores the connection between existential analysis and music therapy, while Forinash and Gonzalez (1989) describe music therapy from a phenomenological perspective. Daseinsanalysis can offer another way of looking at human existence and therapeutic presence.

This article describes music therapy from the perspective of existentialism, specifically one of its branches—Daseinsanalysis. This approach is based on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and was influenced by the clinical work of Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss, who each developed distinct forms of Daseinsanalytic thinking. Daseinsanalysis deals with the idea of being-in-the-world—how people exist here, in this reality. It is precisely this way of thinking that can offer a new perspective in music therapy: on therapeutic presence, human experience, and the space that music can create.

This daseinsanalytic perspective encourages us to understand the human being as a whole. It is crucial to look beyond symptoms and dysfunction. A similar holistic perspective can also be found in other music therapy approaches, such as Carolyn Kenny's *Field of Play* (1989), which emphasizes the importance of relationships and human experience. In therapeutic work, we address questions of meaning, freedom, limits, and authenticity. We often work with people who experience feelings of loss, disconnection, isolation, and loneliness. Daseinsanalysis does not view such experiences as pathological but as a reflection of human existence.

The theory of Daseinsanalysis also emphasizes presence in therapy. The therapist is not seen as an impersonal expert who is there to "fix people"; rather, they are regarded as a human being in authentic contact with others. Music can support this way of relating through its ability to provide clients with forms of nonverbal and emotional expression.

This article aims to introduce a Daseinsanalytic perspective to the music therapy community, as I believe this approach can offer new ways of thinking in our work. Integrating existential approaches can help us perceive the individual in therapy as a whole—not just as a set of problems, dysfunctions, and illnesses. This perspective has gradually taken shape through my work with Autistic, ADHD, and Intellectually Disabled children and young people. It continues to bring new perspectives to my music therapy practice together with my training in Daseinsanalysis.

## Theoretical Background: Daseinsanalysis and Existential Therapy

### *Existential Philosophy and the Development of Daseinsanalysis*

Existential philosophy seeks to explore the deepest aspects of human life. It asks questions about how we relate to the world, to others, and to ourselves, avoiding generalized and direct theories and instead focusing on analyzing lived experience. It deals with subjective perception, which is influenced by time, the body, and freedom through aesthetic perception and everyday life (Crowell, 2020).

Daseinsanalysis as a psychotherapeutic approach originated in the mid-20$^{th}$ century through the work of Ludwig Binswanger and Medard Boss, who were influenced by Martin Heidegger. Unlike therapies that work with unconscious content or address specific problems, Daseinsanalysis focuses on how a person exists in the world and the possibilities for their authentic living (Čálek, 2004).

## The Difference Between Daseinsanalysis and Other Existential Therapies

Daseinsanalysis differs from other existential therapeutic approaches in that it is directly based on Heidegger's philosophy. Its uniqueness also lies in its distinct ontological perception of human existence. It does not focus solely on a specific psychological problem but examines how a person exists in the world and relates to their own being-in-the-world (Boss, 1963).

Čálek (2004) presents Daseinsanalysis as a therapeutic perspective rooted in the question of how a person exists in the world and how they may come closer to the possibility of being themselves. Daseinsanalysis does not seek to make people discover their meaning in the world; instead, it helps them recognize themselves as beings who already exist in the world in one way or another. This approach therefore seeks to uncover new possibilities in the world through therapy.

This shift in perception stems from phenomenology, which is based on lived experience and intersubjective understanding. Unlike other psychotherapeutic approaches, Daseinsanalysis strives for openness and authentic experience of the world before explanation and interpretation (Fuchs, 2010).

## Key Concepts in Daseinsanalysis

Daseinsanalysis is defined by several fundamental ideas that are essential for understanding it. The first is *being-in-the-world*, a concept that refers to the fact that humans always exist within a world of various relationships, concerns, and meanings. It posits that our existence in the world is inseparable from the surrounding world, such as other people, objects, and so on.

Another key concept is openness, which describes a way of being. It involves perceiving the world and its meaning openly, without premature judgment. This means viewing the world free from judgments, thoughts, opinions, and other distortions (Heidegger, 2018).

Heidegger also introduces the concept of anxiety, which he sees as the key to understanding ourselves. By anxiety, Heidegger does not mean the usual fear of something specific, but rather a deep anxiety experienced when the world recedes from us and we see our own existence. Confronting this profound experience can help us achieve authenticity. If we avoid it, however, we become inauthentic to ourselves (Heidegger, 2018).

Finally, a further distinctive feature of Daseinsanalysis is the perception of presence within therapy. The therapist is not regarded as an expert whose goal is to diagnose and put things in order; instead, they are perceived as someone who shares their presence with a suffering being. This shared presence is healing in itself (Heidegger, 2018).

## Relevance for Music Therapy

Daseinsanalysis does not perceive mental suffering as an illness. Rather, it considers it an expression of how a person relates to their life and is open to their own existence. Mental suffering is not regarded as pathology or theoretical abstraction (Boss, 1963).

Daseinsanalysis can help music therapists open new perceptions of music as an existential connection. This offers new possibilities for expressing connection, silence, freedom, desire, and suffering, and can support the greater search for humanity. It also supports ways of being with clients and respecting their humanity, vulnerability, and search for meaning.

## Therapeutic Presence in Music Therapy

In Daseinsanalysis, presence in therapy is understood more as a way of being rather than a learned skill. It represents fundamental openness toward another person. In Daseinsanalysis, a therapist does not attempt to understand or treat clients but perceives them as human beings within the context of their lives (Čálek, 2004).

This perception of presence stems from Heidegger's philosophy and is referred to as *Dasein*. Heidegger does not view presence as superior to our relationships with others; instead, he posits that we perceive presence through our concerns, connections, and attunements. Presence is the state of being attuned to the unfolding of another person's being within the shared space of a given moment (Heidegger, 2018).

This means the therapist in the therapeutic setting is not outside the process, observing or directing it. Instead, they are together with the client in a shared world of meaning. Medard Boss (1963) emphasized that Daseinsanalysis encourages therapists to be attentive to the way clients are in their existence, rather than analyzing their experiences through theories. The goal of therapy is not to observe the client from a distance, but to be with them. Presence is not about creating it, but about being in it—in any way that emerges for us.

This perception of presence is supported by the Czech tradition of Daseinsanalysis. Oldřich Čálek (2004) views therapy as understanding the client's way of being, which emphasizes an existential orientation toward openness and respect rather than understanding through various theories and methods.

### *Presence as a Phenomenological Event*

The perception of presence in Daseinsanalysis shifts attention from the therapist to the relationship between therapist and client. Presence is not perceived as a skill of the therapist, but as sharing space during a session, going beyond ordinary empathy or attunement. It should represent a deeper connection, where the client's experience appears as it truly is (Čálek, 2004).

Medard Boss emphasizes the idea of letting things flow freely. He suggests gently encouraging clients to allow things to take their natural course, rather than attempting to control them and predict the future (Boss, 1963).

This perception of presence is similar to the perception of music in music therapy. Music also flows freely, moving through time and connecting us with others, while always leaving space for something new. It brings a shared experience without the need for words. In a study on music therapy education (Eggerding, 2023), therapeutic presence is described as both a way of being and a form of action. It is created through openness and focused attention on what is created in the music and in the silence (Eggerding, 2023).

### *Music as a Medium of Presence*

Music therapy provides a space where people can connect through music. This connection is not achieved through words, but through shared involvement and musical activities.

Music gently encourages clients to share their experiences in ways that may feel more comfortable than approaches favoring rational thinking and established modes of expression. Music allows us to capture the deepest layers of emotion and expression, which cannot be expressed verbally. This perception of music supports what Medard Boss (1963) calls a form of existential openness—a way of being that allows the present to reveal itself as it truly is, without the need for interpretation or control.

It is precisely this musical openness that can enrich our therapeutic work. Music therapists do not work through musical manipulation but use a shared musical space. During music therapy sessions, we create music with clients and respond naturally without

the need for control. Our musical presence is not passive; it involves creating an environment where clients can be authentic and express themselves in their own way and without pressure (Aigen, 2005).

Music therapy can be seen as a dynamic process between therapist and client. It may be understood as a co-therapist that deepens the connection between therapist and client. I believe it is important not to try to over define music in music therapy, because in the process of definition, it risks losing its true essence. It is precisely this phenomenological process of looking at music therapy and music that can bring freshness to our work.

### *Presence as an Ethical Stance*

Presence in therapy is more than mere interaction. From the perspective of Daseinsanalysis, presence is understood as being with another person in the fullest sense. A person is perceived as a whole being, not merely as an object defined by diagnosis, symptoms, or therapeutic goals. This approach respects the complexity, vulnerability, and uniqueness of each individual (Čálek, 2004).

Medard Boss describes this approach as one based on deep openness and mindfulness toward others. The therapist allows clients to unfold their journey freely, rather than analyzing, interpreting, or directing them. The goal of therapy is not to fix the client, but to be present with them on their journey of discovering new life possibilities (Boss, 1963).

This approach resonates in music therapy. When a therapist improvises with a client, listens to their music, and shares moments of silence, it creates a natural and free path to finding new possibilities for the client's life. It communicates: *I am here with you. I respect you for who you are. You don't have to change. I accept you for who you really are. You don't have to earn my attention.* This way of being present is not passive but active. The therapist accepts the client with complete openness, which is warm and non-judgmental.

## Reflections on a Daseinsanalytic Approach in Music Therapy with Children

In my music therapy practice, I work with children with ADHD and those on the autism spectrum. Daseinsanalysis helps me better understand the influence of presence, relationships, and a pleasant therapeutic environment, rather than focusing on symptoms, diagnoses, and therapeutic goals. This approach encourages me to ask questions such as: *How does this child experience the world? What is it like for them to be here and now?*

Daseinsanalysis reminds me that each person is a whole being, not merely a collection of deficits or traits. When I approach a child through this perspective, I am not trying to change them, calm them, or make them conform. I simply want to be with them—to share a moment of time and space not defined by performance, progress, or correction.

It is this approach that allows me to be authentic in music therapy. I see music not as a tool, but rather as a space where I can be free and authentic with the child. The child is not pressured to adapt to music and therapy; instead, music and therapy adapt to them. In this way, music therapy becomes a shared pleasure rather than just another box to check.

Daseinsanalysis often requires me to enter the inner world of the child and follow its rules. I do not expect the child to enter my world. I listen with deep openness, paying attention not only to their words and actions but also to their presence in music therapy. When I encounter impulsivity or other inappropriate behavior, I respond with curiosity rather than reprimands and regulations. When there is silence during the session, I observe attentively rather than feeling anxious.

Daseinsanalysis also requires adherence to ethical principles. It is important to respect the child's natural way of being and not try to change it. In Daseinsanalysis, the goal is not to change the client but to create an environment where the client can achieve existential openness toward themselves and discover new possibilities for their being.

## Conclusion

This article describes how Daseinsanalysis can enrich music therapy by shifting the focus from solving the client's problem to perceiving the client as a whole being. Inspired by Heidegger's philosophy, it views presence, openness, and being-in-the-world not as a set of techniques, but as a way of being in the present.

Daseinsanalysis strives to perceive clients in terms of their way of being in the world and their lived experiences with this world, rather than perceiving them as a set of deficits, symptoms, and problems in need of correction. Music offers a space for deep encounters with clients, providing a shared space without the need for words or pressure to perform.

Daseinsanalysis helps me in my work with children with ADHD and autism to see them as whole, unique beings—not just as symptoms, diagnoses, and problems. It reminds me that therapy is not about performance, constant improvement, and correction, but about presence, sharing moments together without the pressure to perform, without constant correction and expectations.

Daseinsanalysis supports human-centered music therapy. It emphasizes respect, presence, and truly being with someone in their own world. As such, it brings a fresh and meaningful perspective to music therapy.

## About the Author

**Tomáš Vacek** is a music therapist and social worker from the Czech Republic. Alongside his therapeutic and educational work, he also works in online marketing. He has a master's degree in social work and training in holistic, integrative, and Nordoff-Robbins-oriented music therapy approaches. His thinking has also been influenced by Daseinsanalytic psychotherapy training, especially its self-experiential part.

For more than ten years, he has worked with children, adolescents, and people with intellectual disabilities, autism, and ADHD. He is a professional member of the Czech Music Therapy Association, where he is also a board member. His main interest is how Daseinsanalysis can bring a more open, human, and holistic perspective into music therapy.

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