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Music and Psychotherapy: Two Ways to the Same Goal

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I am neither a neuroscientist nor a musician. Yet, the very first idea of this seminar came to *my* head. I am a practical psychologist. And practical psychotherapy is something in the middle of these two. Professionally, I help people to restore the fullness of contact with what they themselves choose. To restore (or sometimes to build anew) the very ability to be fully in contact with what they choose. Good contact is anyway a new experience, even if it is a meeting with an already known object (cf. listening to familiar pieces of music). Good contact presupposes energy (excitement), free will, presence, involvement, and assimilation of the exchange that has happened between me and the outer world.

Now, why music? First of all, because it is a process that gets us involved and train us to be present here and now. Everyone will tell you he listens to music. But very often people just mean that music fills the emptiness or muffles the tumult of their permanent anxiety. Yet, there are still those who *do* listen to music. I have no doubt such are those present. It is quite a special culture to know how to be nourished and changed by music, how to choose the harmony and the rhythms appropriate to this specific moment of your life and allow it to harmonize you, support you, give you energy and help you think more freely. It is quite a culture that needs a **special mental structure**, the so-called “feelings trained for contemplation”, to use St Paul’s wording.

Nowadays everybody, too, think they know what psychotherapy is. Though very few are those who have more or less sane notions about it. Mostly, people expect it to **just muffle anxiety** and **restore energy**, and indeed, such an effect can be achieved, but it is not at all the core and essence of psychotherapy. Which is a special culture of becoming fully aware of oneself-in-the-world and, even more important, of oneself-in-the-Other’s-presence. It is a **special training of awareness** – and such is practicing music, too.

So, I will make an attempt to show what a psychotherapist aims at in his work, and to compare this with what music does to its conscious listeners. (Speaking of psychotherapy I mean the Gestalt approach).

First of all, as a psychotherapist, I listen very attentively to my client – and not only to the contents of his speech (to “the words of his song”), but to the “music itself”: to the intonations, to the modulations in his tone, to the changing energy of his voice; to his posture, to his muscular tensions and so on. I help him see better the integrity of his entire state. The person thus no longer feels alone with his difficult and often contradictory feelings and thoughts, he **feels himself seen**.

This is not as I catch him in his contradictions! I am there *FOR him* and not with the aim of teaching him play childish tunes in C-major. I am there for him so that he could have his Other who is not judging or teaching. Russian linguist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin insisted: “I can only realize myself, come to know myself and become fully myself when I open up to the Other, *through* the Other and *with the help of* the Other”. Human nature is interactive. It needs an interactive situation to accomplish its realization. Life is more or less good for this, yet sometimes life is too harsh to do without some special

helping situations. One of such helping situations is psychotherapy, another may be music. (Saying music I mean practicing music or *conscious** listening to it. *conscious as aware, not rational or purposeful)

So, I listen very attentively to the “music” of my Other and he **feels heard** which helps him to hear himself better. And you know what? If a person knows how to really-listen to music, then, when he attentively listens to a piece of music – something similar might happen: he can better hear and understand himself! Let’s see how this happens:

Please, remember **your state** when you listen to a good piece of polyphonic music. Do you come in touch with it with merely your ears – or **with all your psychophysical self, with your very flesh and bones?**

If I listen with my “surface” I’ll get only the surface of music, too: there I have a beautiful melodic move, here the sonorous bass reminds me of the vanity of all things, there again an elegant sequence leads me somewhere into a more pleasant direction... In a couple of minutes I’m led astray, I’m no longer *in* the music – though the music might still be giving me pleasant sensations somewhere in the background – I’ve made the music my **background**, my **springboard** into my thoughts; music is no longer the **figure** of my contact, my mind goes faraway into its own images and distant memories, I’m no longer here, where the music speaks to me...

There is me, and there is music, and the question is how to remove this **gap in between** and still remain myself? The same question arises when I wish to contact somebody I really appreciate, maybe I love this person, or simply want to understand and support him/her very much, then I have the same question: How to remain myself, to feel the boundaries well and yet feel the Other and his situation like he himself feels it, not “as I would have felt is I were him”? It’s a widely spread mistake that I must forget myself for that, no, on the contrary, I will need to be very much rooted myself, to stand very firmly on my own grounds. I will need my full awareness for this.

If I **am** to embrace the whole polyphony at once, I need something more than my ears and attention. To embrace and contain its wholeness, I need to **live it through**, to switch on more than ears and mind, I’ll need to switch on the wholeness of my bodily feeling.

You must know the state when music – (and as for me the organ music is the best training example for this) – when music sounds from within you, when you suddenly find yourself able to be simultaneously with all its parts and tunes, with all its polyphony at once! When you are able to combine the details of every musical phrase and the integral comprehension of the entire harmony... (My clients are sometimes very much surprised to know that this is possible not so much under chemical mind-expanders but much better and safer with the full awareness trained by good course of psychotherapy!) It’s the ability to **FULLY STAY IN THE MOMENT** not falling away into reflections *about* what’s going on. Theologians say when we think **ABOUT** God we are led astray from God, the same is true about music. And the same is true about our contacting each other. An organ with its rich vibrating sounds that we can feel literally with our whole bodies gives us a good practice of integral involvement into the process of being-with music. We can follow each strand of music with our **EMBODIED FEELING**, like we can follow a wish or a strong emotion.

So the second thing I do for my clients as a psychotherapist is widening the range of their awareness, building up the missing levels of awareness. For some of us it might be the level of embodied feeling (the proprioception, or the felt sense of your muscle tone accompanying emotions), for others it might be the level of emotions or its names (missing the words for emotions called alexithymia by medical men), for still others it might be their own attitude towards their phenomena, etc. I invite them to switch on the lacking level of cognition and take into consideration the polyphonic structure of their emotional life, I train them, step by step, to focus on each of the emerging emotions and thoughts with their embodied feelings resisting the temptation of giving quick readymade meanings for them.

An important thing here might be - and this is the third thing I can do for my clients, common with what music can also do - is differentiating the intrapsychic processes that used to be mixed and tangled.

This mixture of various feelings/thoughts might sometimes be a serious source of anxiety. We say that "anxiety is excitement minus oxygen", or that anxiety is "excitement lacking a form, excitement that has lost its good shape". Very often people suffering from depressive-anxiety states can find nothing but music to express their feelings about the world and music becomes the only sphere where they can come out of their depressed state and breathe.

Doing therapy for the depressed people we must feel their inner stillness, to get for some minutes attuned to it, and then catch the wave of their tiny inner motion to something or from something and support it, so that it didn't die out (as is usual for all their inner movements when unsupported). The mixed and tangled energy thus gets its order back, receives support and finds its vitality and form - that is, leads to a good contact where it used to be interrupted.

Finding an appropriate shape for excitement so that it could be accomplished - is the next good thing common for listening to music and going through a psychotherapeutic session.

Examples: Listening to music we may give ourselves the place to feel something that we have never had time and courage to feel and live through... we might weep... and then feel relief. In such a way we can unfold our grief, sorrow, sadness, anger, tenderness, fury etc. - which we have yet found no opportunity to express in address to somebody. I knew a *very* polite and extremely refined woman, a top-manager in a bank, who was, "in her secret life", an ardent Rammstein fan. ☺ I'm sure it saved her lots of psychosomatic problems or depression.

Of course, it was not the only music she listened to: healing the contact-making process includes a great variability of forms, then excitement finds its forms more smoothly and no longer turns into anxiety. "Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality" is the title of the basic book in Gestalt-therapy. If the forms are too rigid, relationships die and turn into a neurotic repetition; if there is not enough clear forms, it will be a terrifying and full of anxiety psychotic experience.

What is important here, we don't offer readymade forms to a sane person (a psychotic might need some, to rely at least on such a **crutch**, for there's a terrible lack of clearly defined things in his world), we differentiate the inner processes and ask to feel them clearly - after which the meaning will come to the client's head, not to mine!

This WAITING FOR THE MEANING TO COME is vitally important, if I hurry my client to formulate his own meaning quickly - I run the risk to impose my own meaning upon him. (That's a cultural trend in our educational system, by the way!)

I remember when I was 5-6, my Mom used to take me with her for lots of musical events, some of which were too far beyond my understanding. I was then a good girl and sat straight through a long concert of, say, Skryabin or Shnitke, and it was all ok till the mortifying question came: "Well, my darling, what's your opinion?" ...

An opinion must come after living through emotions, and not the other way round! That's why, too, attentive listening to every sound (and to every emotion) is about **sane thinking**.

There's a very special state of being - much discussed nowadays but no less out-of-reach for most modern people, though vital and simple: our ABILITY TO STAY IN THE PRESENT MOMENT. Some philosophers call it DWELLING ON the moment (Mamardashvili, «способность времени»), or maybe Dasein, and Gestalt-therapists call it AWARENESS. It is the key word in our theory and in our practice: **we train being fully aware of oneself-in-the-moment**. Don't you think music gives us the same experience: **HERE I AM LISTENING TO THESE SOUNDS...**

Example of the young man with panic attacks who told me once: "I could not understand at first what did you mean by telling me 'Don't run away from what you feel! Stay for some time inside your sensation!' And then I got it! It's **like what I do when listening to my favorite music.**"

By the way, what I meant asking him not to run away from his feelings had very much to do with neurophysiology: the panic disorder might be described as a short-circuit fault, when excitement is shunt between the thalamus and amygdala - and psychotherapy restores its proper going through the neocortex.

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To sum its all up, my main points are:

Both **music** and **psychotherapy** are very specific **activities, interactive in their essence and leading to a new and better level of thinking**, feeling and being-in-the body. Both maintain awareness and refine the mental structure of its adept.

Both **train the brain** to be more and more integral, comprehensive and coherent.

Both are instruments for better self-understanding and self-expression.

Both provide vast range of opportunities to overcome grief, pain and sorrow inevitable in life - and overcome it not merely distracting oneself from but **giving the right form and strength to face it** and go through. For, indeed, "the best way out is through" (R. Frost).

And here lies the great **social meaning of both music and psychotherapy**: by making the mind more capable of overcoming pain (including the so-called “negative emotions”) they **reduce harm in the world** (though I hate to sound pathetic, sorry). For **harm comes out of being unable to contain the pain of life**.

Both require the entire human nature (the mind, the soul and the body) **involving one’s whole being into the process of listening** (or, in case of therapy, of **awareness, i.e. listening to oneself-in-the-world**) in order for these processes to be curing and complete.