

“Music has charms to soothe the savage breast”

Connie Nugent MLS

Love Field Airport in Dallas features live music in the junction of its three wings. On one occasion, as a guitarist was playing, a toddler standing with her mother in front of the stage began to bounce in time to the music. A little over a year old, she instinctively bobbed her chubby legs to the rhythm, eliciting smiles from passersby and a grin from the musician. Truly charming.

Human response to music is as old as human history. Archeological digs reveal prehistoric flutes fashioned from animal bones; India and China record evidence of musical instruments dating thousands of years BCE; ancient Egyptians credited the god Thoth with the invention of music; Genesis 4:21 states that one of Cain’s descendants was Jubal, “the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and pipe.” Elisha commands, “Get me a musician” in 2 Kings 3:15, and “while the musician was playing, the hand of the Lord came upon him.”¹ Ancient Greek pottery displays flutes, lyres, and other stringed instruments, often used to accompany poetry recitals. Apollo was the Greek god of music and of medicine, recognizing the connection between the two disciplines.²

First performed in 1697, William Congreve’s play *The Mourning Bride* includes as its first line, “Musick has Charms to soothe the savage Breast/to soften Rocks, or bend a knotted Oak,”³ implying that the rhythm and sounds in music can calm even one with a violent, aggressive nature. King Saul recognized the value of music to assuage his tormented nature in 1 Samuel 16:23, “And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.”¹

The changes in musical tempo and volume, coupled with measured intervals, can affect the basic functions

of the body, lowering blood pressure and pulse rate and regulating breathing, making music useful in treating anxiety and stress. Chariyawong et al studied the effects of music therapy in an Intensive Care Unit, “We wondered whether music therapy could decrease sedation requirements, improve patients’ anxiety ratings, and improve hemodynamic parameters.” They considered two questions: (1) whether music therapy improves a patient’s sleep quality over standard care without the addition of music, and (2) whether music is actually beneficial or it is simply the reduction of background noise. Patients with music therapy experienced lower anxiety and required fewer sedatives. This study concluded that “music therapy should routinely be prescribed for patients in the ICU” and that “the type of music should be geared toward relaxation . . . with a sustained melodic quality and a general absence of strong rhythms, percussions, and lyrics.”⁴ Allan Schwartz, MD, points out that “stress is a killer,” and recommends “listen[ing] to music that you find joyful.”⁵ The teenage girl in the animated movie “Abominable” remembers how her father played his violin and made her feel better when she was despondent. After his death, she plays his violin to lift her spirits.⁶

Music can unite communities as well as provide therapy to individuals. Appalachia is one of the most impoverished areas of the United States. In her study “Music in the Mountains,” Baummer attributes “political, economic, and environmental injustices due to the coal mining industry” as reasons for the region’s chronic rural poverty.⁷ Writing in the 1940s, poet Margaret Walker (1915–1998) captures the raw emotion of that poverty in her poem “Childhood.”⁸

*When I was a child I knew red miners
dressed raggedly and wearing carbide lamps.
I saw them come down red hills to their camps
dyed with red dust from old Ishkooda mines.
Night after night I met them on the roads,
or on the streets in town I caught their glance;
the swing of dinner buckets in their hands,
and grumbling undermining all their words.*

Corresponding author: Connie Nugent
Contact Information: Connie.nugent1@gmail.com
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*I also lived in low cotton country
where moonlight hovered over ripe haystacks,
or stumps of trees, and croppers' rotting shacks
with famine, terror, flood, and plague near by;
where sentiment and hatred still held sway
and only bitter land was washed away.*

The tone of a passage is the emotional effect created by the writer's choice of words, images, details, point of view, language, and syntax. One word to describe the tone of "Childhood" is *despair*. A sense of despair is created through the combination of feelings of hopelessness, despondency, desperation. Words like famine, terror, flood, and plague support those strong emotions. The author, for example, uses "famine" because she may have witnessed starving people experiencing a scarcity of food. Although moonlight beaming down on haystacks is a positive image, images in the next line—stumps of trees and rotting shacks—provide an effective contrast and intensify the tone of despair. The miners "dyed with red dust" from the iron ore trudge "raggedly" with their "grumbling undermining all their words." Surely a feeling of hopelessness is pervasive.

How might music help such downtrodden folks? Baummer investigated the music in Appalachia and "how it functions to provide emotional support for the people who live there." Traditional folk music in this region evolved from Old English ballads and Celtic music brought by the first Scotch/Irish settlers, but most of the music she heard was old-time string band music and bluegrass, country, and folk. Over several weeks, she interviewed five women and nine men ranging in age from 23 to 78 about their musical experiences. Typical comments included, "...singing—it's a joy in your heart" and "'music...took away my worries, my problems.'" Baummer concludes that music "brings them together as a community, it expresses pride in a shared heritage, and it reflects the moral values of a simple way of life." For the people in central Appalachia, "music fulfills an emotional need for identity."⁷

In her novel *The Songcatcher*, Sharyn McCrumb traces the evolution of a folk ballad from its origins in Scotland to present day North Carolina. Young Malcolm MacQuarry is kidnapped in Scotland in 1751 and learns "The Rowan Stave" from an English

sailor who counsels him, "When you are given a song that has been handed along from singer to singer over the years, you are entrusted with it, for it is the work of folk who are gone now... You must pass it along to others, and keep it as good as you found it."⁹ Singing alleviates the sailors' boredom on the journey and eases Malcolm's fear and anxiety. Two centuries later, "songcatchers"—musical scholars—roam through Appalachia, re-discovering old ballads. "Why set such a store by one, old lost song," muses Nora Bonesteel. Perhaps "it was a touchstone with the past—a remembrance of all the singers who had ever kept a story alive on the strength of their music, and that singing the ballad was a chance to join that chain of voices stretching all the way back to across the ocean to the place where the families began."⁹ Nora likens songs to seeds, in that they "wanted to be scattered so that things would grow far from where



Anne Warner recording Frank Proffitt (1913–1965). Pick Bitches Valley, NC. 1941. Photo by Frank Warner. American Folklife Center, Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/folklife/guide/folkmusicandsong.html>

they started."⁹ Ballads connect Appalachians with their ancestors, giving them a sense of belonging as they face daily hardships.

Using music to combat feelings of hopelessness and despair is also documented in "Country Music: a Film by Ken Burns."¹⁰ Early episodes in this mini-series illustrate the poverty that pervaded Appalachia and the South in the 1930s and 1940s and the folk music that bound communities, echoing Baummer's belief that "music fulfills an emotional need for identity."⁶ The movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* loosely retells Homer's *Odyssey* in rural 1937 Mississippi

and features folk music and ballads as integral to the film, illustrating the impact music has on communities.¹¹ (N.B. The author's mother grew up poor in East Tennessee during the Depression. As a child she wore flour sack dresses and at one point shared shoes with a sister, but she did remember the pleasure of gathering on the porch as her father played his fiddle.)

Renowned artist Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) suffered from bouts of depression during times when his paintings did not sell. Reflecting his moods of melancholy, he used blue oil paint exclusively to "paint the poor of the cities—nameless, hopeless people driven to begging . . . and lost in private sorrow."¹² The deep-toned 1903 painting *The Old Guitarist* is perhaps the best known work of Picasso's Blue Period; the gaunt man in ragged clothing sits hunched against a doorway listlessly strumming a guitar. His head is bowed, eyes closed. His thin arms and legs seem weak and frail. But . . . he is using music to alleviate his misery. Even at his most melancholy, Picasso recognized that music is a powerful antidote to loneliness and despair.

Music has charms to soothe the savage breast. Music is a cultural phenomenon; since prehistoric times, humans have been drawn to music as a way to identify with a community, as a way to stimulate or mitigate emotional responses, and as a way to heal.

Patients who are physically or psychologically ill suffer stress and anxiety that can compound their symptoms and retard treatment. Physicians and health care personnel might discuss with their patients the types of music they find appealing and may choose music therapy to bring emotional relief, which can in turn benefit healing. In addition, this conversation could establish a positive connection between the patient and the health care provider independent of the current medical concerns. Although Rock and Roll may not be the best choice for reducing blood pressure, the emotional impact of music cannot be denied:

*Do you believe in rock and roll?
Can music save your mortal soul?*

*I was a lonely teenage broncin' buck
With a pink carnation and a pickup truck
But I knew I was out of luck
The day the music died.¹³*



Pablo Picasso. *The Old Guitarist*. 1903. Art Institute of Chicago.

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