

Notes to ponder



Issak Roth comes up for a closer listen as violinist Beth Elliot plays during a music program at the Jewish Home for the Aging. Andy Holzman/Staff Photographer

Researchers say music soothes the soul, awakens the mind

By Evan Henerson
Staff Writer

Got a song in your heart? Whether you're playing, composing or listening, researchers say you're doing yourself nothing but good. Heart rate, blood pressure, nervous system, you name it. According to music therapists, your favorite songs — or even those unfamiliar to you — have therapeutic and recuperative powers.

Age and ethnic background are irrelevant. Researchers say few of us are immune to the benefits of the healing power of music.

At the Jewish Home for the Aging in Reseda, for example, resident Victoria Shaw rises from her chair during a music workshop and begins dancing to "Scalercia de Oro," a Sephardic wedding song.

This isn't a dance class; any music-inspired behavior is welcome.

"There is no right or wrong on this room. Your reactions are your own," workshop leader Leslie Lashinsky, a bassoon player for the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony tells the workshop participants. "That's the beauty of the abstraction of music, and that can be its most wondrous power if we let it, that it reaches inside of us and brings out what's true."

Less than 10 miles away, at the Music Therapy Clinic at California State University, Northridge, music therapy professor Ron Borczon sings a welcome song to Drew, a 10-year-old autistic boy at the start of a 30-minute therapy session. The boy bangs out an accompaniment on a large drum, occasionally switching over to sound the cymbals or a gong, all within easy reach. The sessions, Borczon explains, are designed to help Drew expand his language and expressive skills.

"I think the primary focus is to give him not a music appreciation, but a

music awareness," says Drew's father, Kevin. "As I understand it, through music, hopefully he'll have more capability to control some of the inner turmoil that seems to be frequently within him."

The spectrum between the students in the CSUN Music Therapy Clinic and the residents of the Jewish Home for the Aging is vast. Stroke victims use musical beats to learn to walk again. Music can be the avenue through which people communicate for the first time in years. Borczon hopes to see music used in treatment of performance anxiety. Researchers at the University of Miami have been studying ways music can maintain wellness, monitoring seniors' blood pressure at regular intervals during a 10-week keyboard class, and have noticed a boost in their immune systems.

"We just got done with a study of

music and autism," said Borczon, who has worked with disaster victims in Oklahoma City and Littleton, Colo. "People with limited communication skills — we noticed that they enjoyed the music sessions. For many of them, their language skills had improved, but not to a statistically significant amount."

"The most powerful aspect of music is rhythm. Rhythm will help you get more excited when sped up, when slowed down, it helps the body calm down."

To hear program and activity directors at senior facilities tell it, music is — if not a cure-all — certainly a balm, a language that everybody speaks. Even if dementia robs a person of short-term memory, sing a couple of bars, and chances are good that person will finish the line.

"From my very first day, I learned

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that it's the most important tool we have to reach people who can't otherwise be reached," says J. Christopher Alexander, program director at Los Feliz Gardens retire-

ment community. "Studies bear me out. Music is the most essential tool we can use."

Strictly speaking, the L.A. Jewish Symphony's Senior Project isn't a form of therapy or medical treatment, though administrators are monitoring their guests' responses. Symphony teaching artists such as Lash-

insky, Beth Elliott and Martin Glicklich have been conducting a series of workshops for the Jewish Home's residents of all ages and physical conditions. They play traditional music from the residents' birth and childhood — including lullabies, wedding and holiday music — in preparation for a concert that the entire symphony performed at work-

shop's end.

In this case, the symphony is coming to the residents. But whenever possible, administrators of senior facilities try to link musical programs with a field trip to the symphony or an opera. The act of going out and revisiting events from earlier in life can be as beneficial as the exposure to the art form.

During the workshops, as the music plays, the more able residents keep journals, sculpt in clay or, like Shaw, stand up and dance when the mood takes them. Others lay asleep in their wheelchairs, their hands occasionally moving to a stray beat. Even residents with Alzheimer's disease or some other form of dementia seem to take some pleasure.

"My theory is that if you play music over and over again, seniors have a visceral connection with music, texture and pleasant environment," says Elie Gindi, education liaison for the L.A. Jewish Symphony. "There's a connection between music and a good feeling that's built, and that has nothing to do with remembering."

Those with sound memories can derive a different type of benefit. Playing a kind of free association game, Lashinsky urges participants to call out emotions and colors evoked by the music or to discuss their recollections. The same song that got Shaw dancing prompts another woman to say, "It makes you want to love the whole world."

"The stories that come out of these are amazing," says Elizabeth Gilbert, education director for the Jewish Symphony. "We get them to participate using their own experiences, making a connection between what we're talking about and their own lives."

"Some of them do very little besides just sit and enjoy the music. But I have to believe in some way they're being reached, even if it's just in listening to the music."

Music therapists like Borczon and Kay Roskam of Chapman University emphasize that their work doesn't bring about instant medical miracles. Months of therapy can produce the smallest of breakthroughs.

CSUN's clinic, the only one of its kind on the West Coast, has a waiting list of 45 children, says Borczon, who adds that parents who enroll their children in the program tend not to remove them. Treating both physically and mentally disabled patients, the four therapists who work at the clinic help children and adults deal with conditions ranging from depression to post-traumatic stress disorder.

And breakthroughs can be noticeable. On a recent Tuesday, for the first time in nearly a year of his treatment, Drew brought in a cassette tape, "The Aristocats," to which he and Borczon played along.

"That was a departure," said Borczon. "He really wanted to share that tape with me, so we shared. We started associating different sounds with parts of the tape."

Another client, an autistic 16-year-old named Chris, usually spends a certain portion of his session wandering around the room. Borczon and his aide have been working to help Chris increase his verbal communication skills.

Prior to a recent Tuesday session, Christopher had spoken little more than five words, including "goodbye." Borczon reported that Chris was beginning to learn the names of the other people in the room.

"He loves 'Blowing in the Wind,'" said Borczon, "so we'll play that every session, and every session we'll cue him to say wind. That was the first word he said to us."

But during that day's session, instead of just "wind," the musical cue prompted Chris to delivered the entire line "blowing in the wind," drawing a hearty round of congratulations from his therapist.

It's progress. One note at a time.

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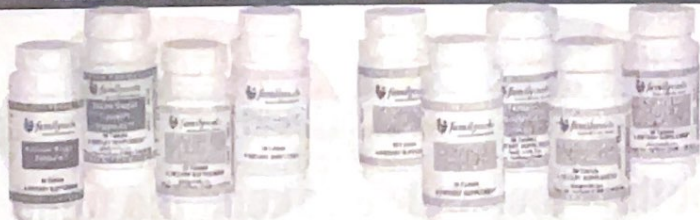


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