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The Healing Power of Music

Deborah Int Veldt

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Music has power. It has the power to connect us to the infinite and ground us to the earth. It has the power to bring us together and to comfort us in our isolation. It can wound us with its poignancy, and heal us with its beauty. We have probably all experienced the healing power of music at some point in our lives.

A few years ago I worked my way out of a mild depression, something rather foreign for me, by listening to music. It occurred to me that I was no longer listening to my favorite music. Like Appalachian old-time or Irish traditional string band music, old rock and roll, salsa, or my favorite classical symphonies or choral pieces. They all have the effect of lifting my mood.

It turns out that, according to a 2011 study, published in *Nature Neuroscience*, listening to music releases dopamine, the feel-good neurotransmitter involved when we experience pleasure and reward. To get the best effect you have to be actively listening, so music playing in the background won't have the same effect. Now I'm not suggesting that those who are clinically depressed can simply listen to a little music and be all better, but using music in addition to other therapies could possibly enhance the effectiveness of those therapies.

An entire book about the healing power of music was written about 20 years: "The Mozart Effect". Do you remember it? It was wildly popular for a while. The author, Don Campbell, claims to have healed a blood clot in his brain with music. Fascinating. The whole

book cites anecdote after anecdote of people who have healed various ailments with music. It's a fascinating read which I recommend highly.

My relationship with music goes way back. My earliest childhood memories are of listening to my favorite symphony on an old record player and conducting it while I walked around the house. I was 5 and dreamed of being a conductor someday. Funny how things work out sometimes, eh?

I was in love with music from the beginning, I suppose. It spoke to me – to my emotions – in a way nothing else did. I wanted to play an instrument, so when the instrumental teacher came around in the 4th grade seeking new players, I signed up. When I learned that I would need to rent an instrument that was the end of that. I never even mentioned it to my mother. I knew I couldn't ask her to pay for it. With a sick, disabled husband and six children, she was always struggling to make ends meet. You can imagine that I was terribly disappointed. But - it didn't take me long to figure out that I could sing for free. Built in instrument! What could be better? I never looked back.

So actively listening to music will help you feel better, but to get the healing effects, you need to generate endorphins. Endorphins are opiate-like molecules that are produced naturally in the body. The word “endorphin” is actually a mash-up of “endogenous morphine” – morphine we make in our own bodies. Endorphins are produced in most cells of the body and are important regulators of cell growth – an important factor in immunity. How do we use music to elevate our endorphins and enhance our immunity? By **performing** music. Singing or playing an instrument generates endorphins.

Naturally, I'm a big fan of singing. Surprise! And, indeed, Don Campbell may have healed his blood clot by singing so bring on the singing! But I believe that healing from singing extends all the way to the soul. Now, not just any kind of singing will do. I am grateful to have been blessed with a beautiful singing voice, and I do enjoy singing solos, but solo singing only feeds my ego. Choral singing, however, feeds my soul. That's the healing part. Whose soul doesn't need some healing? I know mine does. Always. If my soul is whole, my body has a better chance to heal.

Amazingly, there is considerable research about the power of singing – especially choral singing. If you're looking for the fountain of youth, join a chorus! If you're depressed, join a chorus! If you're tired, join a chorus! Lonely? Join a chorus. If you are in need of any type of healing, join a chorus. Okay, I understand that's not an option for everyone – more's the pity – but really do try to find a way to do some group singing. It can be as simple as going to church and singing the hymns and songs. Or a Taizé-style service, which – oh by the way – we'll be having in a couple of weeks. The repetitive, chant-like quality of that music is just what the doctor ordered.

For those who have never experienced the joy of choral singing, let me see if I can explain the magic a little. I've been singing in choruses for over 50 years, so in that time I have sung hundreds of choral songs. So much great music. Most of my choral experiences have been quite good. I had an excellent high-school teacher, Sondra Keir Proctor. She brought us some of the greatest music of the choral world and she trained us well. My experiences under her tutelage really cemented my passion about choral singing. The college choirs I sang in were good also, even though I didn't go to one of the acclaimed music schools. After college I sang some at the UU church in Rockville (ok – not the best choral experience ever, but still fun, under the direction of my dear friend, Niki Davis, who is 91 now and still active in UU Musicians Network. We sing some her music.) Then in 1994 I joined the Frederick Chorale under the direction of our own, beloved Nancy Roblin. That group and Nancy changed my life. But I digress....

So how does the magic happen? Picture this: It's the first rehearsal of a new season. You've been given a stack of new music. One by one the group "sight-reads" through each piece of music. A few of the songs might immediately appeal to you and you know they'll be great, but most of them seem sort of 'meh'. Now, I always try to reserve judgement on that first reading because here is what happens. Week after week you attend rehearsals, learn your notes, hook the words up, start working on the interpretation (loud here, soft there, connected, detached, whatever....) and then the magic starts. At first you don't even realize it's happening. Maybe it's when the basses come in that OMG totally sends you. Or it could be a tight women's harmony

that just shimmers. Or an exciting rhythm that builds from something simple and you can hardly contain your urge to dance. Or the way the composer illustrated the words so perfectly with the voices – sheer bliss.

There are an unlimited number of ways the music can grab you. Now every time you get the piece out you know what's coming and you start looking forward to it. And it's in your head. All. The. Time. And then you can't wait to sing it. And then you realize the whole song is about that moment and you're loving every second of it. And you thought it was going to be kind of ordinary. Nope. Not this time. Nearly every piece in the program follows a similar path. By the time you get to the performance it's all inside of you and you are one with it and it is one with you and your soul is overflowing with it.

I feel a little badly sometimes for the choir. Did you know that choir?? We seldom have as much time as I would like for them to learn a piece AND get it into their souls. Sometimes it happens quickly, but more likely, even if they like a song right away, we're scrambling to get it performance-ready in a relatively short period of time so it doesn't really start to take hold until maybe the second or third time we use it. By then they know the notes and all the technical stuff and can just allow themselves to enjoy it. To revel in the music a bit. It has crept into their souls.

One of my most gratifying moments with the choir was when we pulled a simple meditation piece out for about the third time my first year (I had arranged part of it to create some harmony on the refrain so I was actually rather fond of it) and I heard one of the tenors say "Oh good, I love this one!" And to think I was feeling guilty for having trotted it out yet again. In truth, we'd used it enough that it had gotten into their souls. Ahhh.....magic! This was a perfect example of how singing a song once or twice isn't enough. It needs more time to get into your soul. Thank you, Niki Davis, for explaining that to me. She was so right. It's when the music gets into your soul that the magic happens.

It's not unusual for me to be so emotional while singing something really special that I can't sing it. There are a number of pieces that over the years I've never really been able to actually sing. You simply can't sing and cry at the same time. Sometimes it's sad music – about a sad topic – that makes me emotional enough to cry, but more likely it's something about the

beauty of the music and the meaning the words have for me personally. There's a conundrum here about "sad" music: singing something sad and feeling that sadness doesn't leave me feeling sad. Somehow I am uplifted and peaceful. The music has allowed me to process that sadness, healing my soul a little bit.

An important piece of this is what is going on physically. There is something amazing about putting that vibration in your body and actually becoming the instrument. When you sing, the vibrations literally resonate in your body – in the spaces in your chest, throat, mouth, nose and sinuses. You are the instrument. You become the music. It's an incredible feeling.

Long-time UUCF member, Rick Holt, has a theory that when you are singing and harmonizing with others, your brain perceives all that vibration as coming from itself. I love that! Maybe our brains are a bit narcissistic. ☺ And like I said earlier, that although I do enjoy solo singing, I enjoy singing with others much, much more. Blending my voice with the voices of others is a mind-blowing, mind-expanding, soul-healing experience. If my soul is whole, my body has a better chance to heal. Sometimes I am energized, sometimes I feel profound peace, sometimes I am moved to tears, but always my soul is renewed.

So I challenge you now, to find a way to allow music to do a little magic with you – body and soul.

Addendum

Even though, sometimes we don't agree with the theology of the music being sung, in my opinion music written for the church and inspired by "religion" is some of the greatest and certainly most beautiful work of humankind. So when listening to or performing music with theology with which I don't agree, I choose to focus on the beauty of the music and most especially the emotion it evokes.

Stacy Horn, in her book "Imperfect Harmony" quotes a fellow chorister who said, "I am an agnostic verging on an atheist, but find that sacred music is not antithetical to my beliefs (in the way that sitting through a church service is). I've come to the conclusion that music alone (and not the liturgy) represents the essence of what I would find palatable and comforting in

religion. When I sing or listen to sacred music I feel a primal, essential proximity of my fellow man; I feel that the word 'god' is just a great Vowel surrounded by two consonants, something essentially open and going-forth. I can fathom others' faith only through music: If, as Buckminster Fuller once said, 'God is a verb,' that verb is singing."