

THE EXPERIENCE OF MUSICAL SELF-ACTUALIZATION FOR PERSONS WITH DEMENTIA

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For persons who have some form of dementia, there are often few, if any, opportunities in their daily lives to realize their creative potential. However, it is becoming more evident that *music* has the potential to be life enhancing. In the Waterloo Region, several long-term care centres are hiring music therapists to provide creative and musical opportunities for their residents. As a music therapist, I have observed some of the most extraordinary responses to music, which I chose to research while completing graduate studies in music therapy at Wilfrid Laurier University.

Music therapists work with clients from various life situations and backgrounds who present diverse and complex needs. In most cases, music therapy is not concerned with how well one can play an instrument or how well one can sing. According to the Canadian Association for Music Therapy (1994), music therapy is defined as

the skilful use of music and musical elements by an accredited music therapist to promote, maintain, and restore mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Music has non-verbal, creative, structural, and emotional qualities. These are used in the therapeutic relationship to facilitate contact, interaction, self-awareness, learning, self-expression, communication, and personal development.

The purpose of this descriptive qualitative study was to identify and describe a heightened level of human experience that may be observed in music therapy sessions with persons affected by dementia. This inquiry was based upon observations of 7 participants with dementia during 13 group music therapy sessions. Data for this study consisted of spontaneous verbal/vocal content, visual/physical observations, and musical

responses and observations. Categories that emerged were organized to represent the data and establish an adapted grounded theory (Amir, 1992, 1996; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Smeijsters, 1997).

Maslow (1971) described eight ways in which a person self-actualizes. He stated that, “self-actualization means experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption” (p. 45). For the person with dementia, it is also possible to experience music *fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption* (p. 45).

The concept of self-actualization is not new to the field of music therapy (Bruscia, 1987; Gaston, 1968; Nordoff & Robbins, 1971, 1974; Robbins & Robbins, 1980). The notion of *musical self-actualization* came from an initial ‘hunch’ – that something extraordinary and important was happening within music therapy sessions. The observations and discoveries that were unravelling fostered this belief until it seemed undeniable that persons with dementia may have the ability to become *musically* self-actualized in music therapy.

The Participants:

There were 7 remarkable individuals involved in this inquiry - 2 men and 5 women, ranging between 79 and 92 years of age. In an effort to represent these individuals in a creative way that would be reflective of their personal characteristics, poems were written for each individual, including myself, to highlight and represent the individuals more vividly. During this writing process, the beginnings of a musical conceptualization of the group emerged. As ‘titles’ were assigned to the individuals and roles were acknowledged, characteristics of an orchestra became evident. Because there

were elements of a symphony orchestra combined with opera and dance, it seemed appropriate to refer to this group as a ‘*Grand Orchestra*’. Instrumentalists and performers were perceived as follows: The Violinist, The Opera Diva, The Percussionist, The Conductor, The Listener, The Virtuoso, The Dancer, all contained within The Concert Hall. [See Figure 1.]

Findings:

Music is at the core of musical self-actualization, which differentiates it from Maslow’s definition of self-actualization. Here, music is the motivator, the key that unlocks the person and propels them into a realm of heightened experience.

Musical self-actualization is a state of heightened human experience, achieved through the direct properties and affects of music. Musical self-actualization is the result of a musical relationship, which allows a person to move to a heightened level of human experience. There are five ways in which musical self-actualization is manifested, divided into five realms: physical, cognitive, communicative, affective, and musical. These five realms are characterized by different components, which describe how a person might experience musical self-actualization.

I. Physical

The rhythmic qualities of music are known to motivate people to move. However, rhythm is not the only component of music capable of doing this. For the purposes of organization, there are four types of demonstrated physical responses that support the notion of musical self-actualization.

- 1) Performance Movement: A person moves their body in a way that impersonates a musical performer, i.e. pianist, violinist, or conductor; or demonstrates behaviours

inherent to playing a particular instrument. These movements also displayed a level of confidence, which might also be considered consistent with a “performer”.

Gertie was humming “After the Ball” and moved her arms and body as if she were bowing a violin.

- 2) Dancing Movement: A person moves their body in a way that characterizes a dancer, or acknowledges specific dance motions or rhythms through creative movement.

Arthur positioned his arms like a Flamenco dancer during a Spanish drum improvisation.

- 3) General Movement: A person engages their body to experience the physicality of music through clapping, tapping, head nodding, hand rubbing, swaying, etc. This sub-category does not support the notion that any person who claps is musically self-actualized, but rather this recognizes intentional responses that go beyond the typical, and are rooted in a deeper response to music.

Gertie tapped her knees in time to the music. The music was light, and Gertie seemed to reflect this musical “lightness” in her tapping.

- 4) Atypical Movement: A person engages in an intentional physical movement, which could be perceived as bizarre or extraordinary in nature. For example:

Arthur tapped a rhythm on his head (θ θ ε ε θ) with a tambourine, which was very intentional and combined a physical experience with sound and rhythm.

II. Cognitive

There are many different cognitive processes that may be accessed and stimulated during a musical experience. However, it was most intriguing to observe persons with dementia attempting to ‘understand’ or to make sense of music. It became evident that characteristics of a cognitive nature demonstrate another way in which musical self-actualization may be experienced. Expressive and receptive characteristics of cognition will be represented through the following subcategories:

- 1) Expressive Characteristics: A person who demonstrates intact cognitive processes, which include: (a) the expression of knowledge and insight through ‘profound’ verbal statements; (b) asking questions in an attempt to understand something of an abstract nature; (c) making a musical reference; and (d) demonstrating humour.

Arthur asked, “was that a train?” making a referential connection with music and image.

Leo stated, “you can get two tones” (on the hand drum). His highly sensitive, musical comments demonstrated an intentionality and purpose to his playing, which he wanted to share with others.

- 2) Receptive Characteristics: A person who is able to receive information, through the act of focussed listening, internalizing an aural experience. These characteristics could be reflected by: (a) listening in a musical environment; (b) hearing oneself in relation to others and exercising a level of self-awareness or self-restraint during music making; (c) recognizing familiar and unfamiliar melodies; and (d) responding to the direct properties of music, i.e. dynamics, rhythm, accelerandos, etc.

Arthur demonstrated an awareness of and adaptability to key changes and styles during the drumming improvisation. He stopped to listen, then responded.

III. Musical

It became apparent that a musical realm was required to organize data that was observed as purely musical manifestations of the self. These were musical occurrences that were only describable in musical terms, and to try and ‘fit’ these occurrences into other categories would negate the musical essence that was prominent.

Leo created a spontaneous musical embellishment with the tone chime, demonstrating creativity and musical sensitivity.

IV. Communicative

The realm of communication acknowledges the importance of verbal and non-verbal outlets for self-expression. In music therapy, it was possible to identify musical features of non-verbal communication with self and with others. The need to communicate *to be heard* by others is highly purposeful, whereas the need to self-express becomes more personally driven as a direct reflection of the self. For the purposes of presenting this communicative realm, verbal and non-verbal aspects will be proposed.

A) Verbal

- 1) Singing as Communication: A person engages in the musical act of singing as their direct mode of communication. Singing might function as: (a) verbal speech replacement; (b) creative self-expression; and (c) a social device to enhance interactions with others to be 'heard'.

Gertie sang a brief solo with words which is significant for her...her voice was loud and clear and confident.

- 2) Musical Communication: A person who engages in purposeful musical interaction, where intervals, motives, echoing melodies, or engaging in any form of musical interaction with others was significant.

Gertie was unable to answer the question "how are you" – but began to hum instead, which seemed to be very appropriate.

- 3) Verbal Communication: A person who initiates significant verbal dialogue through atypical comments or notable interactions with others. The communications are related to the musical experience, and are often spontaneous and unexpected. Is it possible that music enhances a person's ability to verbally communicate? These verbal contributions verified the human need to communicate with others as well as demonstrating a heightened awareness of others.

Kathleen exclaimed, “wow” in response to a rolled chord in Spanish style.

B). Non-verbal

- 1) The Voice as Extension of Self: A person who adapts the quality of the voice to present itself operatically or in other uncharacteristic ways. This subcategory has nothing to do with singing actual lyrics of a song. This goes beyond merely using the voice to sing. It may demonstrate an increase in self-confidence and self-esteem.

Florence sang in an operatic style when she sang up the octave.

The quality of Kathleen’s voice changed to a breathy, almost jazz-like solo.

- 2) The Voice as Instrument: A person who utilizes the voice and vocal capacities like an instrument, demonstrating an acute musical acuity and intuition. Examples of this included:

Arthur sang “me” instead of playing his tone bar – on the same pitch!

- 3) Cueing: A person who has the ability to respond to visual and aural cues demonstrates a sophisticated form of non-verbal communication (Smith, 1998).

Kathleen and Arthur responded with great intensity to an improvisation, which incorporated both vocal and instrumental cueing.

V. Affective

The affective realm encompasses the emotional and ‘feelingful’ state of human expression. These feelings may be directly observable in the form of physical reactions: laughing, crying, withdrawal, surprise, anger, etc. Affective expressions may also be less obvious and of a more personal and subjective nature. Music has the ability to reflect emotions and offers a creative outlet for self-expression. Emotional responses may be

reflected in a level of musical intensity, which was not characteristic of a person's music.

What is intensely emotional might also be considered spiritual.

Patricia started to beat her hand drum, becoming so forceful in her playing, almost 'killing' the drum – an emotional outlet for self-expression?

Gertie folded her hands in a prayer-like manner as I began the music to close the session

I will continue to be amazed and inspired by the possibilities that music provides for the people with whom I work. And as individuals enter old age, there are still many possibilities for heightened experiences. For now I know with certainty, that music has the properties to facilitate self-actualization, and more specifically, musical self-actualization!

References available upon request.

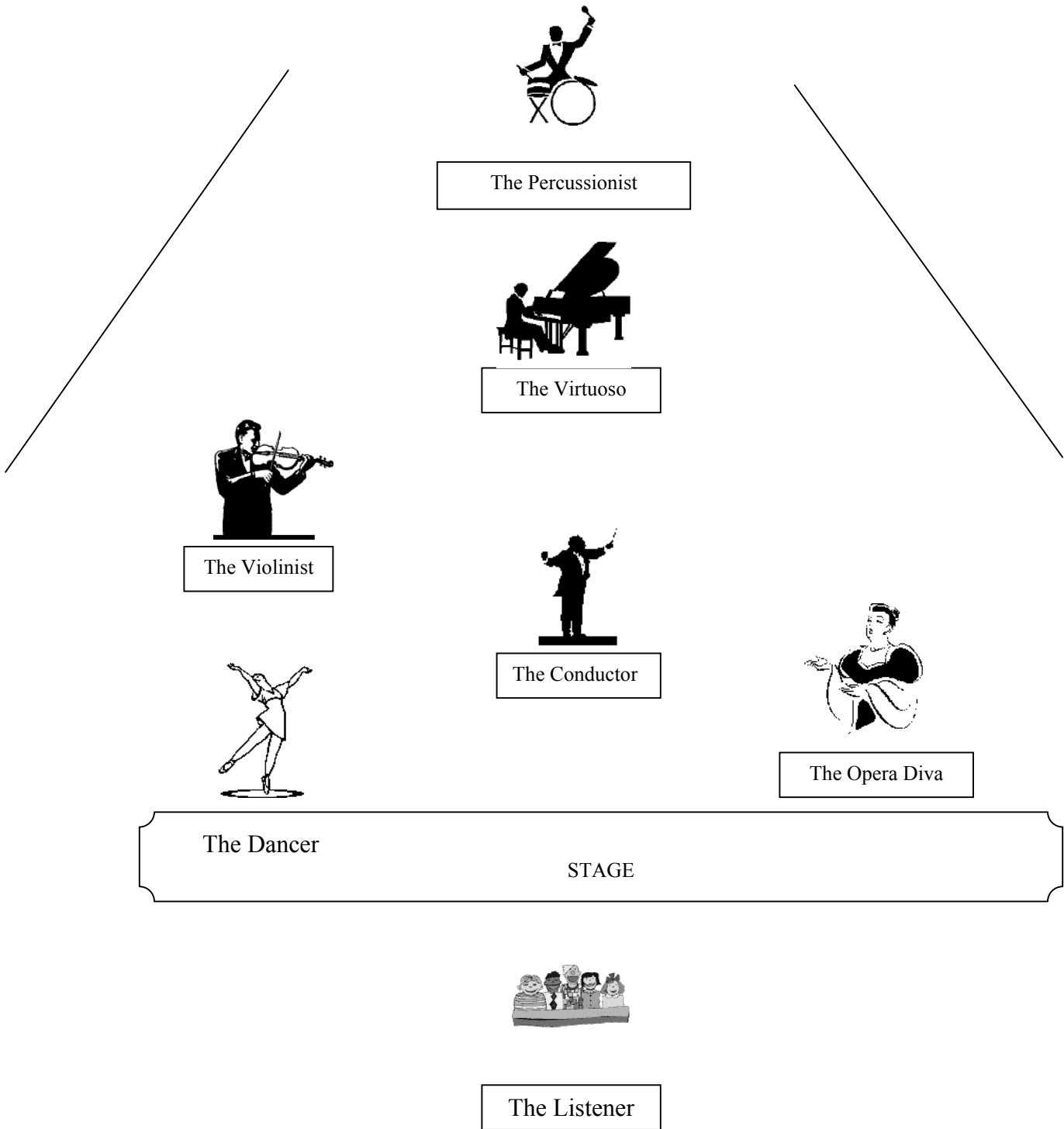


Figure 1. The “Grand Orchestra” illustrates a conceptualization of roles and identities that were observed in a music therapy group with 7 persons affected by dementia