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THERAPY IN MUSICAL NOTATION



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Music as a therapeutic medium is not a modern invention. Even in tribal times, shamans would induce an ecstatic trance during healing rituals, aided by the steady rhythm of drums, hypnotic chanting, and expressive dances. These healing practices gave way to medical knowledge, which for centuries overlooked music. It was not until the 19th century that Canon Howard began to use it to help patients relax in London hospitals. However, music therapy did not emerge as a scientific discipline until the 20th century.

Surprisingly, the world wars played a part in its development. Wounded soldiers and psychologically traumatised veterans were subjected to music-assisted therapy. Playing an instrument and listening to soothing sounds helped to ease the images of bloodshed and provided respite from painful memories, effectively acting as a form of treatment. Music therapy was recognised as a standalone field of study for the first time in 1944 at a university in Michigan. Polish medicine began to recognise the therapeutic properties of music in the 1950s. The first degree programme in music therapy was launched in 1973 at the Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław; other institutions soon followed suit, including the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and the Academy of Music in Katowice. In 2015, the profession of a music therapist was included in the Classification of Occupations and Specialisations, and today certified specialists work in numerous hospitals.

Between 2018 and 2022, an international research project called LongSTEP was carried out in five countries – Poland, Norway, Israel, Colombia and Argentina – with the aim of analysing the impact of early music therapy intervention on premature babies and their parents. Łucja Bieleninik, PhD, DLitt (University of Gdańsk), who led the project on behalf of Poland, invited Sara Knapik-Szweda, PhD, from the Institute of Pedagogy at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Silesia – an educator, clinician, a certified music therapist (MT-C) and supervisor (a graduate of the Music Therapy degree programme at the Karol Szymanowski Academy of Music in Katowice) to participate in the project. As a result, the hospital in Ruda Śląska, where Sara Knapik-Szweda currently works and conducts research, became the first hospital to introduce professional music therapy.

Extremely premature babies struggle with the underdevelopment of almost all their organs; they face breathing difficulties, unstable body temperature, and feeding challenges due to their inability to suckle. The sight of a baby fighting for its life is also a traumatic experience for parents who are sometimes prevented from holding their child because of the severity of their condition and are left with no choice but to watch from outside the incubator.

The work of a music therapist in a neonatal unit requires a great deal of attentiveness and is preceded by meetings with the parents, during which their emotions, needs, and musical preferences are explored. The course of the therapy depends to a large extent on the quality of this cooperation.

Recorded music is not used when working with premature babies. The primary therapeutic tools are live music and the parents' natural voices. Mums and dads are encouraged to sing softly, hum lullabies, and speak tenderly to their baby. Vocal ability is irrelevant – what matters is authenticity, a calm rhythm, and adapting one's voice to the baby's state. The baby recognises the parent's voice from around the 24th week of pregnancy; this strengthens the sense of security, supports regulation, and helps build a bond.

'The baby's reaction to a parent's voice or a soothing lullaby is visible on the monitors, which register the baby's oxygen saturation, heart rate, and respiratory rate. Physiological parameters begin to normalise as agitation and crying subside. In subsequent sessions, coordination skills related to feeding are reinforced. Listening to the parent's voice also helps to alleviate pain, which in turn makes it possible for the baby to achieve a state of self-regulation. Another extremely important aspect of music therapy is its non-invasive nature. Should overstimulation occur – although this has not yet happened – the session can be stopped at any time, as we always adapt to the child and observe them closely', emphasises the therapist.

Music therapy brings nothing but benefits to the lives of premature babies. The main benefit – as parents have pointed out – is the formation of very strong emotional bonds, a better understanding of the child's behaviour, reactions, preferences, and fears, as well as the ability to interpret their expectations, which results in strong relationships with the child. Supporting the physiological, behavioural and emotional aspects of the child's and parents' well-being contributes to the child's healthy development. This therapeutic approach is known as Family-Centred Music Therapy – a method used by Sara Knapik-Szweda in her work.

Many therapists note that the musical aspect that develops in a person is a natural reflex; this is demonstrated, for example, by a baby's first babbling, which is a jumble of sounds and an element of non-verbal communication. So should music be part of our lives? A layperson might say – perhaps, but not necessarily; science says unequivocally – yes!

'Music supports neural connections between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, and even enhances the capacity to form synapses', emphasises Sara Knapik-Szweda. 'It stimulates the brain and hormone secretion, influences neurogenesis, and synchronises brain waves. It also develops the facial motor system (responsible, amongst other things, for emotional reactions) and supports sensory-motor integration because it naturally provokes emotional expression. It causes the brain to seek out new solutions and new connections, sometimes lost for various reasons', argues the researcher.

There are currently five hospitals in Poland offering professional music therapy for premature babies and their families, and the issue is by no means marginal: every year, around 20,000 children are born before the end of the 37th week of pregnancy.

'I believe that the number of hospitals which recognise the importance of music therapy will continue to grow', says Sara Knapik-Szweda.

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