THE POWER OF MUSIC

Psychoanalytic Explorations

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About the author

Dr Roger Kennedy is a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist and an adult psychoanalyst. He was an NHS consultant in charge of the Family Unit at the Cassel Hospital for nearly thirty years, before going totally into private practice ten years ago. He was chair of the Child and Family Practice in Bloomsbury and is still a director there. His work includes being a training analyst and seeing adults for analysis and therapy, as well as children, families, and parents at his clinic. He is a past president of the British Psychoanalytical Society, and is well known as an expert witness in the family courts. He has had thirteen previous books published on psychoanalysis, interdisciplinary studies, and child, family, and court work, as well as many papers.

CHAPTER ONE

Overture

This book explores, with the help of a psychoanalytic perspective, some of the ways one can understand how music affects us, as we listen to it, and what it is about music that affects us so profoundly and powerfully, often at a deep emotional as well as at an intellectual level. There tend to be two ways of looking at the relationship between music and emotion, the "cognitivist" view which considers that music merely expresses emotions without inducing them, and the "emotivist" view which considers that music induces emotions in listeners. My own take on this is that there is considerable and clear evidence from many sources that music induces brief and sustained emotions of various kinds, and I also take the view that music has a considerable power to express a whole range of emotions, from the most basic and short-lasting emotions to complex and more long-lasting emotions, including those usually involved with spiritual or "other worldly" experiences. Emotion is an integral aspect of musical experience; music has the power to take us on an emotional and intellectual journey, transforming the listener along the way; the aim of the book is to examine the nature of this journey.

Evidence from neuroscience indicates that music acts on a number of different brain sites, and that the brain is likely to be hard-wired for musical perception and appreciation; this offers some kind of neurological substrate for musical experiences, or a parallel mode of explanation for music's multiple effects on individuals and groups.

There are some loose parallels with this kind of listening and musical analysis, particularly the kind that looks beneath the surface of the musical "foreground" to the underlying deep structures of the "background".[2] However, such analysis is a highly sophisticated and intellectual exercise, while listening psychoanalytically and musically are also intensely emotional experiences.

Analytic listening, however intellectually taxing at times, also entails a responsive, receptive, or affective kind of listening, more like trying to make sense of the shape of the communications. During a session the analyst may become immersed in the flow of the patient's material. "As in listening to music, one may follow the melody line, the obbligato, the counterpoint. The analyst is free to move from one line to the other, to hear them all simultaneously."[3]

This kind of listening has also been described as a kind of musical "reverie" by Riccardo Lombardi,[4] which can arise in the analyst particularly during intense emotional exchanges. Lombardi suggests that musical associations have a peculiar capacity of bridging the gap between the concrete and the abstract, between body and mind, the non-symbolic and the symbolic, the internal and the external. He shows how the use of the analyst's countertransferential musical reverie can be used for clinical purposes. As he describes, music is connected with both the concrete world of bodily sensations and the symbolic expression of culture, and may then be an important transitional phenomenon in communication between patient and analyst on both conscious and unconscious levels. He gives two clinical examples where each of the patients' awareness of the passage of time, associated with the analyst's internal musical associations and reverie, made it possible for them to give them access to more fluid and less rigid emotions, with a reduction in their symptoms and with a loosening up of their rigid defences.

Theodor Reik, who saw music as intimately linked to emotions and psychic reality, had already pointed out, with many clinical examples, how musical associations arising in the analyst's mind can be of great help in the understanding of the patient's communications. "The tunes occurring to the analyst during sessions with patients are preconscious messages of thoughts that are not only meaningful, but also important for the understanding of the emotional situation of the patient … The tunes stand in the service of the agents responsible for the communication between the unconscious of two persons."[5]

After various excursions into early mother–baby experiences, evolutionary speculations, and neuroscientific findings, my main emphasis will be that it is the *intensity* of the artistic vision which is responsible for music's power; that intense vision invites the viewer or the listener into the orbit of the work, engaging us to respond to the particular vision in an essentially intersubjective relationship between the work and the observer or listener. This is the area of what we might call the human soul. Music can be described as having soul when it hits the emotional core of the listener. And, of course, there is "soul music", whose basic rhythms reach deep into the body to create a powerful feeling of aliveness. One can truly say that music, of all the arts, is the most able to give shape to the elusive human subject or soul.

In addition, so much of musical enjoyment comes from surrendering to the music, not just because the sounds themselves elicit pleasure, not just because of the effect of the specific emotional content and the play of musical tensions, but because we can lose ourselves in the music while also remaining ourselves; these are the moments of pleasurable illusion. As I shall explore, music has the power in performance to touch the intermediate area between subject and other, giving us the illusion of wholeness, however briefly, where subject and other merge.

This opening chapter is, as befits its title, an overview of the kind of themes I will develop in more detail as the book unfolds. I will cover a number of different ways of understanding music, including psychological, social, cultural, and biological and neuroscientific approaches, as music perception and understanding and musical studies cover so many aspects of human life; no single discipline can do justice to music's complexity if one is to have a sense of the whole musical experience, even if one has to break up the whole experience into various elements for the purposes of clarification.[1]

The issues raised here will have some relationship to psychoanalytic understanding and listening, as after all psychoanalysis is a listening discipline; its bedrock is listening to the patient's communications. While of course there are significant differences between understanding of, and listening to, a musical performance and a patient in a consulting room, there is also, as I shall explore, some common ground.

In psychoanalytical listening, one is listening simultaneously to the "surface" and the "depth" of the patient's communications, to both the conscious and underlying unconscious stream of thoughts and feelings.

To present just one example given by Reik:[6] a patient has a dream. *She is in the bath and is worried because she has forgotten to take off her watch which could be ruined if it gets wet.* There were no helpful associations to the dream. In the pause between her report of the dream and the following sentences she spoke, a long-forgotten tune came to Reik's mind, which he then realised he had not heard since childhood. The title was *The Watch* (by Karl Löwe). He recalled later the first lines: "Wherever I go, I carry a watch with me always, and only need look whenever I'd know the time of day." The watch meant the human heart. Reik then recalled the phrase that Viennese girls used to say, referring to their periods, that "With me it is punctual as a watch." At the next session, the patient referred to her dream and that she had forgotten to put in her diaphragm after her bath, and was worried that intercourse might have led to a pregnancy.

Francis Grier, a composer and a psychoanalyst, in his paper on musicality and the consulting room,[7] describes in detail how attention to the specifically musical dimensions of non-verbal relating in the analytic encounter reaches deep and emotionally resonant areas of the patient's psyche, which verbal language cannot easily reach. For example, attention to the quality, the resonances of the patient's voice, and how this may evoke reactions in the analyst, that is, attention to the "duet" between analyst and patient, may lead to useful analytic work. He gives a detailed example of how he was affected by the grating quality of his patient's voice, and yearned to experience other pitches and resonances, instead of being trapped in the session with her highly dissonant high-pitched communications. Analytic work on his countertransference feelings about the lack of harmony between the content of her speech and its expression led to deep work on her early dissonant experiences, an idealised but dysfunctional relationship with her mother, with an early over-reliance on her father as the only reliable figure.

Although Grier never spoke to his patient in musical terms, he describes that when he allowed himself privately to free associate musically about the quality of her voice and its dissonance, it freed him up interpretatively to get through what had become an impasse in the analytic work, so that in the course of time, in a way he did not quite understand logically, the situation between them moved. This corresponded to a change in his patient's voice, noticed by her friends and family; its pitch dropped, its expressiveness broadened, its unnaturally loud and forced dynamic began to quieten, and she was able to communicate emotion through more dynamic and harmonic means.