

A CASE STUDY ON SONGWRITING IN MUSIC THERAPY

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SUMMARY. This case study presents the process of music therapy sessions in three instances of one-to-one client sessions and one online group session. Mr. Bob Heath, a music therapist with over 20 years' experience, musician, songwriter, and singer, supervised these sessions, providing feedback and clinical support alongside Dr. Lois Paula Văduva, a recent music therapy graduate from The University of The West of England and reader at Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania. This research also illustrates the challenges of every session and the importance of practicing songwriting in a music therapy session. In addition, this case study highlights three techniques used during the study period: client-led lyric and songwriting, improvisation, and song narratives in a music therapy session. Lastly, the therapist's reflections are presented to complete the overview of the work.

Keywords: music therapy, songwriting, singing, music therapy session, client

Introduction and Definition

In ordinary daily life, many people of all ages create songs and tunes, add new lyrics for an old melody, or sing a song they already know. They do not have a reason to explain this phenomenon because humans have wanted to make music since the beginning of time. In music therapy, we find the same principle. Therefore, the music therapist may assist clients in the process of songwriting without having an elaborated goal.⁴

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⁴ Edwards, Jane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Music Therapy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 647.

According to Bruscia, there are four distinct experiences in music; each type has its own therapeutic potential and applications: improvising, re-creating, composing, and listening.⁵

Since there are four main types of music experiences, these are considered the four main methods of music therapy: improvisational methods, re-creative methods, compositional methods, and receptive methods. Improvisational methods enable the client to express feelings that are difficult to communicate verbally. In addition, improvisation develops the ability to make decisions and choices within established limits. Compositional methods are beneficial for clients who need to build identity and organize their decision-making. The most commonly used compositional method is songwriting, which could provide adolescents with a means of expressing and understanding their fears about the future. Bruscia states that it is possible to develop the ability to integrate and synthesize parts into wholes through songwriting.

Songwriting as a therapeutic tool has music that conveys messages and emotions, has a clinical purpose, and music enhances self-expression.⁶ Because songs can be flexible, songwriting is an appropriate intervention for any population. But in some cases, songwriting can be contraindicated. Baker underlines that music therapists should consider an alternative to songwriting when a patient cannot express their feelings through words.⁷

Baker and Wigram define songwriting in music therapy as: “The process of creating, notating and/or recording music and lyrics by the client/clients and therapist within a therapeutic relationship. The aim is to address the client’s psychosocial, emotional, cognitive, and communication needs.”⁸

The songwriting itself is commonly considered a vehicle for the expression of emotions.⁹ “Songwriting refers to how music therapists help clients to create their own songs.”¹⁰

⁵ Bruscia, Kenneth E., *Defining Music Therapy*, 3rd ed (Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers, 2014), 5.

⁶ Baker, Felicity A., “What about the Music? Music Therapists’ Perspectives on the Role of Music in the Therapeutic Songwriting Process,” *Psychology of Music* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 122–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735613498919>.

⁷ Baker, Felicity and Wigram, Tony eds., *Songwriting: Methods, Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p.142.

⁸ Idem, p. 16.

⁹ Stewart, R., & McAlpin, E. (2016). Prominent elements in songwriting for emotional expression: An integrative review of the literature. *Music Therapy Perspectives*, 34(2), pp. 184-190.

¹⁰ Baker, Felicity and Wigram, Tony eds., *Songwriting: Methods, Techniques, and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p. 14.

Using songwriting as a method in music therapy sessions has different therapeutic objects, depending on the individual or group's needs for whom the technique is applied. Songwriting is often based on methods with defined steps and stages. But in some cases, similar goals may be relevant in very different areas of practice.

O'Callaghan, based on experiences from 64 song projects, presents eleven steps protocol for songwriting: offer songwriting, choose a topic, brainstorm, the ideas that emerged were grouped into related areas, offer major or minor keys, choose rhythmical features, find the preferred style of mood, melody-usually the therapist gives the client the choice of two melodic fragments, choosing accompaniment, a title and if it possible the patients recorded it.¹¹ Also, Emma O'Brian, after seven years of music therapy practice, developed "Guiding Original Lyrics and Music," which bears many similarities with O'Callaghan.¹²

The role of songwriting as a music therapy intervention for the therapeutic process could include: coping (externalizing painful issues), life review, self-expression, developing and redeveloping cognitive abilities, communication development, catharsis, and others. In music therapy sessions, the songwriting process could be used to communicate messages to loved ones, record positive memories, self-motivation, and affirm and encourage.¹³ Post-recording validates the emotional journey. Writing a song is a very personal action, and letting others listen to it is even more personal. Nimesh P. Naharsheth, in his book, said that: "we all have a song. That is our spirit, and it is there for all to listen."¹⁴

The therapist's role is to facilitate this process, ensuring that the client takes part in compositions that he/she **felt a sense of agency and ownership**. The therapist provides maximum opportunity for the client to contribute to the music composition.

- Melody. For some clients, creating melody comes naturally along with the lyrics. However, the music therapist must keep in music the entire process, remember melodic phrases, and, if it is necessary,

¹¹ Aldridge, David ed., *Music Therapy in Palliative Care: New Voices* (London; Philadelphia: J. Kingsley Publishers, 1998), p. 48.

¹² Edwards, Jane ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Music Therapy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 648.

¹³ Baker Felicity and Wigram, Tony eds., *Songwriting: Methods, Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p. 127.

¹⁴ Nagarsheth, Nimesh P., *Music and Cancer: A Prescription for Healing* (Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2010), p. 140.

to add a structure (for example, by repeating some verses, words, or phrases). Many songs' musical frameworks are based on verse and refrain, such as ABAB.¹⁵

- Lyrics. Directing emotional energy (negative or positive) into a song can have a therapeutic effect on both the mind and the body. Even if the client does not have musical inclinations, composing written lyrics can be a productive and constructive expression. An easy way to begin this therapeutic process is to keep a journal.¹⁶ The creation of lyrics is a common starting point in songwriting therapy.

Case vignette

a. One-to-one session

Each child's song is unique; however, there are some common patterns. Children are often inhibited verbally but seem to be more comfortable expressing themselves through music. For many children, it seems to be the music-making that initially draws them into the shared activity and then enables them to create stories and songs.¹⁷ It is difficult to identify one method that can be applied to all. In the following lines, I will approach three techniques that I used during the study period.

1. The client composes the words

Case example no. 1

I.C. (for confidential reasons, names have been changed) is a 7-years-old girl born with a cleft palate; she also has ADHD. She underwent surgery and is wearing dental braces. As a result, she has a nasal voice and stutters, and she can't pronounce most of the words. In October 2020, her mother sought me out because she believed that only music could still help her daughter. I.C. has been going to a speech therapist twice a week since she was four years old, and her mother doesn't see a notable improvement in her daughter's speech.

¹⁵ Baker, Felicity and Wigram, Tony eds., *Songwriting: Methods, Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p. 100.

¹⁶ Nagarsheth, Nimesh P., *Music and Cancer: A Prescription for Healing* (Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, 2010), p. 44.

¹⁷ Baker, Felicity and Wigram, Tony eds., *Songwriting: Methods, Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p. 25.

The relationship between music and verbal communication is an ancient one. Our ancestors learned to communicate with each other through music, rhythms, and changes in tempo, which had different meanings. Therapeutic singing can be used with a variety of neurological or developmental speech and language dysfunctions. The use of songs in therapy can help to improve speech pathologies.¹⁸ Based on numerous research, which highlight the benefits of using music in such cases, I used songs to help I.C. to improve her speech. The relationship remains an essential means of teaching verbal literacy skills. After a few sessions, I.C. she managed to feel at ease and sing almost any word. It was easier for I.C to sing a word than to speak it.

Every session with I.C. starts with the welcome song accompanied by the ukulele. After the welcome song, I started asking I.C. what she did in the days when we did not see each other. First, she told me about school (during this time, I asked questions with the harmonic support given by the ukulele, and I sang the questions) and what she had had for lunch. Then, the child started rubbing her hands together, trying to tell me that she had been to the store. The store was somehow connected to her hands, and her father had bought her something. She kept talking to me for a few moments, and because she was afraid to say it, she avoided talking. That's how we ended up making a song about hand sanitizer. And with the help of repeating that word, she managed to sing it (even if she could not pronounce it correctly). She was no longer afraid to sing it.

2. Improvisation

Bruscia¹⁹ stated that improvisational methods might develop a sense of identity and interpersonal skills. Improvisation is definitive by Oldfield and Franke "Using instruments, and the therapist supported improvised music-making while spontaneously a song."²⁰

¹⁸ Geist, Kamile et al., "Integrating Music Therapy Services and Speech-Language Therapy Services for Children with Severe Communication Impairments: A Co-Treatment Model," January 1, 2008.

¹⁹ Bruscia, Kenneth E. ed., *Case Studies in Music Therapy* (Phoenixville, PA: Barcelona Publishers, 1991), p. 5.

²⁰ Baker, Felicity A., "What about the Music? Music Therapists' Perspectives on the Role of Music in the Therapeutic Songwriting Process," *Psychology of Music* 43, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 122–39, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735613498919>

All humans have the creative capacity to generate and modify sound patterns in response to each other from early infant-mother interactions onwards. Musical improvisation is something in which anyone can engage.²¹

Case example no. 2

B.F., aged 12, has attention deficit disorder, behaviour problems, possible autistic spectrum disorder, and fine motor skills challenges. She wants to learn to play the piano. Music is something that B.F. had already discovered before she came to therapeutic music sessions.

We started playing together at the piano. She played the black notes, and I provided the harmonic support. During this time, she began to tell me how much she loves her sister, who is away at college, and that she misses her.

I felt it was the right time to write a song, so I asked her if **she would be willing to try**. Very surprised, she faltered with her hands in the air, and with a smile on her face, she began to nod. F.B. said a verse, and I sang it with piano and the voice, and she repeated it with enthusiasm. In the end, I repeated the whole song, and although I didn't record it to have it as a memory, I can say that I had never seen F.B. so excited. Music is often temporal. Once played, it is just gone; it is a memory.²²

This process took more than 30 minutes, and I think if I hadn't scheduled another hour, she would have kept singing. Children often use patterns in their singing. And in F.B.'s case, the song is almost the same melody in every verse.

I tried to help B.F. make a clear ending to the song and support her in finding a way to finish the process.²³ She almost shouted, "B. loves C., and I miss her!" Finally, writing the song and playing and singing brought my client a feeling of mastery and joy.²⁴

²¹ MacDonald, Raymond AR and Wilson, Graeme B., "Musical Improvisation and Health: A Review," *Psychology of Well-Being* 4, no. 1 (December 18, 2014): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13612-014-0020-9>.

²² Pavlicevic, Mercedes and Wood, Victoria eds., *Music Therapy in Children's Hospices: Jessie's Fund in Action* (London ; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p. 108.

²³ Baker, Felicity and Wigram, Tony eds., *Songwriting: Methods, Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p. 38.

²⁴ Idem, p. 115.

3. Song narrative

Song narratives are music creation techniques in songwriting where the lyric is sung with a limited melodic range in a rhythmic chant form. A chordal harmonic progression can support the lyrics. For the client to tell their story can be stressful, and the song's narration often provides a musical structure that can achieve the therapeutic goal. The lyrics are performed in a type of "spoken song" (*Sprechgesang*), a musical style that may appear more accessible to a delicate client.²⁵

Case study no. 3

M.M. is 35 years old, and she came from an orphanage. She started coming to piano lessons about one year ago, and apart from the fact that I knew how old she was, where she works, and the fact that he has no parents, I didn't know anything about her life.

Pauses are common elements of music,²⁶ and silence is an integral part of music therapy; it allows patients to process different aspects of a session.

Before I started the songwriting process, I realized that I needed to establish a secure therapeutic relationship so that M.M. felt that she could trust me, the situation, and the music. As human beings, we need to feel free to express ourselves in whatever way that we can. As a therapist, my role at this point is to be available and listen. She took more than a year to open up. But now, looking back, I am sure that the context helped me because the right time to introduce songwriting depends on each client.²⁷

Ever since she entered the room, I saw that M.M. was **feeling anxious**. We sat down in front of the piano and I felt she wanted to speak. So, I offered her this opportunity through simple questions (from how her day was, how the hours went to work, how she felt physically), and during this time, I offered her a chordal harmonic progression. I started with a C major, and during this time, she began playing pieces in that range at different octaves. At first, she answered simply, and I felt that she was afraid to approach the root of the problem. She had long pauses in her speech. And then she started telling me emphatically that no one can understand her pain,

²⁵ "Original Songwriting within Known Structures," Ebrary, accessed January 26, 2022, https://ebrary.net/99560/economics/original_songwriting_within_structures.

²⁶ Bunt, Leslie, *Music Therapy: An Art beyond Words* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10098611>.

²⁷ Baker, Felicity and Wigram, Tony eds., *Songwriting: Methods, Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p. 48.

only those who come from the orphanage (during this time, I modulated in a minor, and I used some dissonant intervals to connect with her emotions). More words quickly followed; she sometimes imitated the dissonant piano chords during that time. The climax was brought by a burst into tears when she started telling me that she will never forget when at the age of 5, her best friend was adopted by a family - and no one took her! "And now I sometimes wonder why I wasn't taken from there too" (During this time, I only played a few more notes on the piano). After a long pause, during which I played simple notes, she looked with clear eyes and told me that only God could understand it. I transitioned to C major again and asked her if she wanted to play something together - she chose a hymn that was a cathartic moment.²⁸ The hymn begins like this:

"It's a miracle when the sun goes down,
Miracle of eternity.
But greater is the wonder of the heart,
The wonder that He loved me. "

*Bruscia said "Songs weave tales of our joys and sorrows, they reveal our innermost secrets, and they express our hopes and disappointments, our fears and triumphs. They are our musical diaries. They are the sounds of our personal development."*²⁹ And working with M.M., I vividly understood that songs can reveal our secrets and can express our disappointments. Music can contribute to making life possible and livable.³⁰

Working with M.M., I realized the importance of giving the client the sense of being listened to and heard.

b. Group session (G and D, online session)

Generally, songwriting was reported as an intervention used in one-to-one therapy, but a few authors have described that the group experiences encourage social interaction, group cohesion, and feeling of group supportiveness.³¹

My first step in creating a songwriting context was to identify common group issues. D. and G. expressed their thoughts and feelings, improving group decision-making skills. The group members then briefly discuss each one, and

²⁸ Idem, p. 169.

²⁹ Bruscia, Kenneth E., *Defining Music Therapy*, 2nd ed (Gilsum, NH: Barcelona Publishers, 1998), p. 9.

³⁰ Bunt, Leslie, *Music Therapy: An Art beyond Words* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), <http://site.ebrary.com/id/10098611>.

³¹ Cordobés, Tania K., "Group Songwriting as a Method for Developing Group Cohesion for HIV-Seropositive Adult Patients with Depression," *Journal of Music Therapy* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 1997): 46–67, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jmt/34.1.46>.

a group decision must be made to select one theme. All ideas given by clients are written down and are used as the basis of the lyric-writing process.

In the process of writing, D. and G. chose to use an acrostic, and the main word was Freedom - the opposite word for what they felt that day. Then I gave them a choice of two chords (the major and minor chords). Next, I started playing an open chord, and then each of them composed a verse. When the song was finished, I asked them if we could record it. With their permission, we recorded the song. Being online, it was challenging to be "together," so I offered to record the music for them.

The final step of group songwriting provides students with opportunities to develop a feeling of group pride and achieve a sense of personal and group competence. **Also, to receive** feedback and reinforcement of the entire group songwriting process.³² Both felt better in their current situation and realized that the busy schedule, fatigue, and exams would soon end.

Usually, songwriting results in a product like a piece of sheet music, and writing the song becomes a remembrance of that day (Appendice no. 1).

4. Challenges throughout the work

My first challenge appeared the first time I wanted to introduce the songwriting process. I had an experience that helped me that I must be careful when I started the process of songwriting. In the sessions of I.C., we always learn songs. Being mother's day, we learned a song about this holiday. In a few sessions, I.C. tells me that she learned to write "mama" at school and started talking to me about how much she loves her mother. Then I encouraged her to write a song for her best mother. I sat down at the piano and began to play simple happy piano chords, but she directly began to sing the music we had learned a few sessions back.

In the **Baker** and **Wigram** books, I discovered that the music therapist is careful not to play well-known tunes or phrases that might have some negative associations for the children. And in my case with I.C. **to be aware** of association with another song.

Another challenge was remembering and practicing what my supervisor, Mr. Heath, taught us from the beginning: "Stay in the music with your client." The first sessions with my colleagues were challenging because we did not apply that.

³² Edgerton, Cindy Dubesky, "Creative Group Songwriting," *Music Therapy Perspectives* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 1990): 15–19, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mtp/8.1.15>.

5. Therapist's Reflection on the work

I have learned that the songwriting process is not about me and my musical skills during this work. Also, I understand that I must help clients open up and facilitate the moment when songwriting can be a successful way to aim for a therapeutic goal. Also, I must take care to understand why I use songwriting and how I think it helps the client. What music affords is dependent upon how it is used.³³

I learned that if I structure the song musically, it will be much easier to write it if I didn't manage to record it. During the work, I learned the importance of having the necessary skills to sustain a song harmonically.

6. Brief conclusion

"Keep it simple and stay in the music" were the words that Mr. Heath reminded us of during each class, and that had a significant impact on how I understood and applied songwriting in the music therapy sessions.³⁴

In the end, I think applying the songwriting method can make a significant difference in a client's life and in my life.³⁵

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<https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735613498919>.

³³ DeNora, Tia ed., "After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology," in *After Adorno: Rethinking Music Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 151–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511489426.008>.

³⁴ Edwards, Jane ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Music Therapy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 645

³⁵ Baker, Felicity and Wigram, Tony eds., *Songwriting: Methods, Techniques and Clinical Applications for Music Therapy Clinicians, Educators and Students* (London; Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005), p. 45.

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Appendices no 1.

Freedom

Elisa Pastor

Voce

D[°]/C G7 Cm A^b Fm/A^b G C7

Lup-tând zi de zi spre mai bin-ne, Ieri mai pu-țin ca azi

⁵F^m B^b7 A^bMaj7/B^b E^b Cm D[°]/C G7 Cm G C7

Și azi mai pu-țin ca mâi - ne; Bi-ru-ind și azi e-un pas 'na-in - te,

⁵F^m B^b7 E^b G7 Cm Cm/G G7 C

E-un vis îm-pli-nit ca-re RĂ-MÂ-NE. ca-re RĂ-MÂ - NE.