

The Purpose of Art – Especially Music, and the Role of Music in Therapy Professor Raymond Tallis and Professor Nigel Osborne

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This presentation took the form of two separate talks offering complimentary approaches to the purpose of art and the role of music in therapy.

Professor Raymond Tallis began by stating that he loves music and offered a few quotations, such as Nietzsche: “Without music life would be a mistake”. He then considered the broad question of whether our understanding of art can be enhanced by neuroscience, or if it is irrelevant to think of it in those terms. He stated that there was generally a misrepresentation of music in neuroscience, but offered his thoughts on “some purposes of art”.

He stated that it satisfies one of our “Hungers”, and went on to classify the four human “Hungers”. While the first three hungers are for the fulfillment of biological and social needs, the fourth hunger is for a true and deep spiritual experience. He clarified this by saying that music fulfils our need to shake off our “existential numbness” by seeking experiences for their own sake. We hunger for a true experience, a connected experience, and that is where art as a celebration of our uniquely human freedom comes in. It is an experience for its own sake. He illustrated what he meant by this by suggesting the differences between walking (existential) and dancing (experience for its own sake), or poetry and prosaic speech.

Professor Tallis went on to say that enjoying music is an experience fully experienced, an expectation fulfilled, where the journey is the important part – we do not listen to music in order to get to the end. Music is an experience of emotions for their own sake, a celebration of freedom. Within this freedom there are constraints – freely chosen constraints, which are the agreed structures of music. For example, music is made up of individual notes; heard individually they are without meaning, but when connected to be part of the larger whole, there is meaning and a sense of movement through time and space.

Professor Tallis concluded his elegantly delivered thoughts about what music means to us by offering some philosophical statements, such as: “Its untethered meaning is potentially boundless.” “It is the supreme mystery of human knowledge.” “It helps heal the wound in human consciousness.” His final remarks considered the role of music as therapy and suggested that while he does not consider it to be therapy for the brain; it is certainly therapy for the soul. It defies definition in neuroscience, and serves no obvious practical purpose.

In comparison with Professor Tallis’ theoretical approach, Professor of Music - Nigel Osborne (University of Edinburgh) based his presentation on bio social paradigms and case studies. By establishing innovative and ground-breaking collaborations with a series of influential organizations, such as NESTA, he explores new perceptions and approaches to applying music therapy methods to special education in non-clinical settings and in a way suitable and safe for implementation by teachers and community music animators.

The first phase of the project he presented sought to investigate and develop innovative performance for new music technologies for children with special challenges. ‘Therapy for the soul, not the brain’ he stated. Professor Osborne philanthropically employs a therapeutic use of music for children suffering

from a variety of conditions. After presenting a series of 'sensitive' case studies which took place at the Hillside school in Ayrshire, and the Park, Woodstock and Witchhill Schools in Kilmarnock, he suggested that music helped their bodies, minds and interactions with other people, concluding that we cannot ignore the psychosocial impact of music in therapy.

Some of the experiments took place in a swimming pool with their carers; one boy had a problem with unfamiliar places and a girl was rigid with anxiety. As a result of Professor Osborne's musical intervention the girl started to enjoy the water, kicking her legs, and the boy, who had a nervous way of moving his fingers, began to move them in time with the music. The musical stimulus appeared to be activating their centers of emotion, helping to regulate their stress and lowering the heart rate of these traumatised children. Other cases included three children who could not speak because of developmental difficulties so Professor Osborne tried to relate to them by means of music. The children responded and one child vocalized and played with some tubular bells. Another case study was based on children excluded from normal school due to behavioral issues and in this instance the Professor employed a speech therapy based exercise - creating a music circle and practicing vocal music from Angola. It would appear from the examples shown that music helps to create a feeling of empathy, promotes communication and engenders spiritual growth. Even though music therapy is a developing science and no firm conclusions have been reached for many cases music proves powerful enough to heal and to alter feelings.

Music is a communicative language and yet many societies do not have descriptive words for it. 'Why would you like to give a name to music?' Professor Osborne wonders. His insights inspire many questions, such as "What does the word music refer to?" "Music is all things to all men – a wide repertoire of styles and cultural influences is important in therapy work, because the choice of music must resonate with the subjects receiving therapy" he concluded.

The two presentations created an interesting scenario of different styles of delivery by offering complementary approaches to music as therapy. Professor Raymond Tallis' philosophical approach offered some subjective thoughts about the effect of music on the soul and sought to define music itself while arguing that there is as yet no scientific precedence for it as locations in the brain which respond to music also respond to a host of other physical and mental stimuli. His delivery was gloriously fluent and poetic, which was in itself a pleasure for the listener. Professor Osbourne followed a more experimental approach and warmed the audience with his compassionate empathy towards the subjects of his exploration. "It works in practice – but does it work in theory?" he joked. Though their presentations were not derived from empirical investigations based on scientific method, they offered vibrant philosophical concepts, subject and a wealth of material to consider and reflect upon.