

Considerations on Choosing and Using Music for Relaxation and Healing

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The healing powers of sound and music have been revered for thousands of years, but only recently have leading edge researchers and musicians begun to understand fully the deeper and more subtle implications of this most ancient of the healing arts. Over the past 40 years, key secrets have been identified that expand greatly upon the classical bias of orthodox music therapy and disinterest of the entertainment-oriented music industry.

Now that the field has attracted the attention of millions of individuals who want an easy way to reduce stress, enhance health and well-being, while simultaneously being pleasing to listen to, there has been a great deal of mis-information that has made it confusing for many listeners to know how to choose and use healing music in their personal and professional life. In this short article, I (Steve Halpern) will share my perspective, as both an artist and customer.

In a few short moments, you'll know more about the field than is taught in most colleges, and be empowered to make more informed choices to get the most benefit for your time and money.

A PERSONAL NOTE

I am often asked, "How did you get into this field?" The answer is simple: "It got into me! On one hand, about 40 years ago, I began hearing beautiful music in my mind's ear that made me feel so peaceful and relaxed, I longed to be able to hear it with my physical ears. On the other hand, my doctor told me that if I didn't learn how to reduce my stress level, I would soon suffer from many of the stress-related diseases like hypertension, difficulty sleeping and concentrating, and getting sick more often.

Having read in books about that music was used in ancient societies for healing, I searched for suitable soundtracks for health. There was very little music composed expressly for this purpose, and even less research into the healing powers of music. As a trained musician, I realized I was in a perfect position to combine my personal and professional proclivities.

When I performed my healing music in public, people always asked me for a recording that they could use at home. I was encouraged to establish my own independent record label, and soon discovered that composing the music was the easy part. I soon learned that I had to educate the public, as well as the growing ranks of holistic, alternative and integrative health care practitioners about healthful and stress-reducing aspects of music that had not been addressed before.

Keynotes of Sound Health

How do we respond to music? Many individuals never consider this topic. Traditionally, this question was answered with respect to the elements of melody, harmony and rhythm. Tone color/timbre was added in more modern textbooks. The psychology of music, as a field, and music therapy, historically focused on our emotional, psychological and physical responses. Physiological responses were limited to gross motor responses, like the knee jerk response, or blood flow through a finger. Until I conducted landmark research studies using brainwave biofeedback EEG, Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) and Kirlian (subtle energy field/aura) photography, no one had researched music's effect on subtle energies and consciousness.

In my work, I have identified deeper levels of response-ability, building upon the pioneering research of Hans Jenny (cymatics) and quantum physics. Here is a brief overview.

For this discussion, I'll limit my remarks to focus on an understanding that self-healing occurs most effectively in a state of deep relaxation. Sound and music can be a potent force to engage this response. But most music may NOT be your best choice if your goal is health rather than entertainment.

Most music was not composed for true relaxation purposes. (Nor am I suggesting that music should ONLY be composed for that purpose. But using the wrong music virtually sets you up for failure if

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you with regard to healthful responses. It would be like drinking three cups of coffee and trying to go to sleep. That's not the function of caffeine-laden coffee. Why would you use the musical equivalent of coffee to help you relax?

Lesser known is that most music evokes more of a stressful response than people realize (cf John Diamond, "Your Body Doesn't Lie"). The reduction of stress, and enhancement of relaxation, is therefore fundamental to most all healing music. (Herbert Benson, MD, best-selling researcher and author of "The Relaxation Response") That is why my CDs are composed with the intention and compositional constructs that provide stress reduction...at the speed of sound.

Your One Minute Guide to Understanding Healing Music

1. The Rhythm Factor:

The law of rhythm entrainment describes the phenomenon in which a stronger, external stimulus overrides the natural internal rhythm of the heart and causes it to synchronize to its stronger beat. If you listen to music whose tempo is faster than a relaxed heartbeat, (top range about 60 beats per minute) then your heart will be forced to beat in time to the music, which is commonly from 90-140 beats per minute!

That's also like drinking three cups of coffee and trying to go to sleep. You essentially set yourself up for failure. And you'll be awake all night to think about it!

It's easy to identify for yourself whether the music is relaxing for you. Measure your resting heartbeat, and then measure your heartbeat while listening to the music. If your heartbeat were faster, this would NOT be a good choice for your relaxation library. (Although it might be a fine choice for other uses).

This is precisely the reason that my own recordings do not have a strong central rhythm. I was inspired by my yoga training to compose with the implicit rhythm of a deep, slow yogic breath. (Most reviewers, likely listening after drinking three cups of coffee, were unable to perceive this secret)

But your heartbeat will immediately appreciate the opportunity to reset its rhythm into the natural rhythm of a deep breath. This is as apparent to many first-time listeners as well as long-time fans.

2. Melody and Harmony:

I'd like to discuss melody and harmony together as 'distraction factors' in evoking the relaxation response. For psychological responses, much has been written. We have been culturally conditioned (by Western classical and pop music) to respond to familiar patterns in predictable fashion, when we hear scale-based melodies or harmonic progressions. We are unconsciously forced to project into the future...where the music is going.

In live presentations, I always demonstrate this secret by singing a scale.... and stopping on the seventh note. I do not complete the sequence with the eighth tone of the octave note. You can prove it to yourself right now:

Take a moment to imagine me singing a scale. (Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-La- Ti.....and notice that you are predictably holding your breath because I did not finish the pattern!

I coined the phrase 'scalus interruptus' to describe this phenomenon, and why you are left feeling 'future tense.' In other words, simply listening to 'ordinary music' CREATES stress and tension!

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Relaxation, on the other hand, happens only in the present moment.' You can't relax 'in the future.' You can only relax 'in the now'. Or, to paraphrase spiritual teacher Ram Dass, (Be Here Now), I say, "Hear. Now. Be." tm Remember, we are human be-ings, rather than human do-ings.

Trying to relax while listening to music that keeps you off balance and out of the NOW is therefore not an effective choice if you want to relax. Listen to even 30 seconds of my CHAKRA SUITE, RELAXATION SUITE, or OCEAN SUITE and you can feel the relaxing change that comes over your body. It's that easy, and that quick.

Your body is hard-wired to shift gears into a state of relaxation, if you only give it a chance. That's why people the world over enjoy being out in nature, at the ocean, by a lake, on the farm or in a mountain meadow. And when you can't get out in nature, properly composed relaxing and healing music can bring nature to you by giving your 'human instrument' the chance it wants and needs for optimal health.

3. Resonance:

Resonance describes the reality that every atom, molecule vibrates at a specific frequency, and functions as both a transmitter and receiver of vibrations at that frequency. Therefore, every organ, gland and muscle in our body has a specific natural frequency which exists within the range of audible sound.

In essence, when you listen to music, you are receiving a vibrational massage. If the music is organized to resonate specific frequency-specific areas of the body, like my CHAKRA SUITE, than we can use sound to assist our body to resonate at a higher level of coherence and efficiency.

Resonance is what you feel when part of you is tingling or buzzing when you hear quartz crystal bowls or Tibetan singing bowls being played. The tones of the Rhodes electric piano are produced by precisely tuned 'tuning forks' that are struck lightly by a hammer attached to the keyboard. It is not a synthesizer. That is the secret of why its tone is so pure, and why it changed my life the moment I bought one: I now had the most beautiful healing instrument at my fingertips, ready to play and record healing music.

4. Tonal Color and Timbre:

In my earlier career as a professional performing musician, I played trumpet and electric guitar. The basic sound of these instruments is not intended for relaxation. That was one of the reasons I had to switch to the gentler sounds of electric and grand piano, and atmospheric, psycho-active sounds I could play with electronic keyboards. Many acoustic instruments, like violin and oboe, actually produce waveforms that are irritating and stress-inducing for many people, whether they are aware of them or not.

In my dreams and meditations, I heard music that sounded like celestial bells and heavenly harps. When the instrument was invented, I became one of the early advocates of the Rhodes electric piano, which is featured on my CHAKRA SUITE and many other recordings.

I also learned how to adjust and record the glorious grand piano to remove the harsh attack and enharmonic overtones that interfered with my relaxation as I composed or listened. Every instrument on my recordings is chosen for its relaxation and healing effects. There's a time and a place for brittle and dissonant tones, but not in my healing music.

5. INTENTION and MUSIC: Thought Field Resonance:

In my experience, there is an additional dimension that should be discussed with respect to subtle energy factors.

When I first went public with my music and theories in the early 1970s, I described the power of intention of the composer or performer as being a critical factor determining what the overall effect would

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be. For instance, the same melody or notes could have a positive or negative effect depending on the stress level of the performer.

It's as if this 'meta-information' is broadcast and transmitted by the musician to the listener, albeit in an inaudible manner. Quantum physicists have now proven what mystics and musicians have known for millennia.

I coined a phrase to describe this phenomenon thusly: "Music is a carrier wave of consciousness." Now that intention has become such a popular concept, it's easy to understand that it's not just the notes, but the energy that comes thru the notes, that must be considered when choosing healing music.

Depending on the sensitivity of the listener, music intended for meditation and healing can help the listener to quiet the mind, and get into the gap between thoughts. Deepak Chopra and Wayne Dyer have written eloquently about this.

I have always described my own compositional process as 'getting into the spaces between the notes'. In either case, by quieting the mind, such music creates the proper vibrational resonance in which the individual's brainwaves more easily attune to the natural harmonic resonance of the earth (Schuman resonance, 7.83 Hz)

It may therefore be impossible to calibrate how much healing happens because of the music itself, vs how much occurs 'automatically' when the listener gets into the proper alpha brainwave state facilitated by the music. The bottom line is that some music is much more effective in this regard than others.

My approach to sound healing has always been first and foremost to compose soundtracks that will serve the highest good for the highest number of listeners, rather than to impress the listener with the complexity of my compositions or technical virtuosity. I believe that the large and growing international audience that my music has created provides a strong testimonial that it has succeeded in its intention.

Listening at low volume creates a soothing mood and relaxing ambiance for general background use at home, at school, at work, for yoga, or massage, pain control, post-operative recovery, in clinics, hospitals and hospice care.

Many individuals have also discovered the beauty, benefits and blessings of listening with intention and focused attention (especially with headphones, and not multi-tasking), and thus enjoy a greater depth of experience. Listening to this music in this way can indeed transport you into the gap between thoughts, leaving you feeling uplifted, relaxed and renewed, at peace with yourself and the world.

SOUND MATTERS... FOR THE RECORD

Most people have no idea how profoundly the sounds and music in our life affects us, for better or worse. Here are just a few of the most significant effects:

Common effects of stressful music and noise pollution include (cf "Sound Health", Steven Halpern, Harper & Row, 1985): Hypertension, higher stress levels in general, as well as higher cortisol hormone levels, irritability, difficulty sleeping, concentrating, fatigue, digestive problems, weight gain, alcoholism and hyperactivity (especially in children)

COMMON EFFECTS of HEALING MUSIC

Reduced stress, enhanced relaxation, improved sleep, enhanced concentration and focus, improved digestion (less gas and more efficient digestion, which also often promotes weight loss, better

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dispensation, greater ease in holding and stretching into yoga postures, enhanced rapport with one's significant other both emotionally and sexually. In sum, the music one listens to can make a significant addition to one's personal health and wellness program.

When choosing which music to buy for your own relaxing and healing sound library, consider that appropriate music should include the above-identified universal commonalities as well as your personal preferences and history. Making more informed choice empowers you and allows your body/mind/spirit the most benefit and pleasure in terms of your own health and self-healing.

About the Author:

Steven Halpern is widely acknowledged as the pre-eminent composer of music for health and healing. He is a pioneering sound healer who brought the art and science of healing music into the field of complementary/integrative medicine and to the mainstream public through his best-selling recordings, including CHAKRA SUITE, Music for SOUND HEALING, GIFTS of the ANGELS, PEACE of MIND and RELAXATION SUITE. Read more about sound and healing at www.stevenhalpern.com