Music Therapy by Proxy: Using Humanised Images in Song

Carol Chambers

Abstract

Developing awareness, exploration and expression of emotionally sensitive issues can be difficult for some clients in music therapy. They may find it hard to express emotion through improvised music and may turn instead to the perceived security of the repetition of known songs.

This paper presents the results from a completed research PhD, a qualitative case study based on naturalistic clinical practice, which examined the song choices of one woman in a medium-secure forensic unit over the three-year course of her music therapy.

A descriptive narrative account was subjected to analysis according to a modified form of therapeutic narrative analysis (Aldridge and Aldridge 2002), resulting in the abstraction of a series of generative metaphoric images, framed within a chronological series of events. Crucially, these images were found to be humanised figures, yet they were also emotionally decentred or depersonalised. When approached from the philosophical and methodological perspective of behaviourism, which views these as conditioned responses associating music with life experiences as part of a process of developing self-identity, such images can be seen to provide an unspoken voice for the client's feelings to be expressed in a manner that is personally revealing, socially acceptable, culturally accessible and therapeutically constructive.

I assert that using these third-person characters as a form of proxy facilitates mutual reference and experimentation, and places music firmly at the heart of a socially constructed process of music therapy.

Keywords: imagery; metaphor; song lyrics; forensic music therapy

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Introduction

Developing awareness, exploration and expression of emotionally sensitive issues can be difficult for some people in music therapy. Some clients find it hard to express emotion or life experiences through improvised music and may turn instead to the perceived security of the repetition of known songs. This paper draws on aspects of completed doctoral research which examined the use of songs chosen by women in forensic psychiatric units. It suggests that metaphoric images found within these songs, in the form of humanised images or depersonalised third-person characters, can be used as a form of proxy which provide not only an unspoken voice for the expression and examination of clients' feelings, but also a means of mutual reference which facilitates musical and personal experimentation and contributes to a socially constructed process of music therapy. I will provide a brief introduction to the theoretical framework and methodology of the whole research project

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before concentrating on a more detailed presentation of some of the most relevant results in order to demonstrate the process by which my assertions were developed.

Research framework and design

My PhD, entitled *Song and Metaphoric Imagery in Forensic Music Therapy* (Chambers 2008), grew out of ongoing clinical practice in two medium-secure psychiatric units for women when I noticed that many of the women avoided musical improvisation and instead chose well-known songs and repeated them endlessly. I wanted to explore and understand the significance, or the meaning, of these songs for the women concerned and so I adopted a qualitative research paradigm (Creswell 1998) with a naturalistic approach (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 37) where the music therapy sessions could continue largely unaltered. Both Creswell (1998) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) talk of building or constructing a complex holistic picture of the reality of the experience for all those involved. They focus on processes of interaction, mutual influence and shaping, all of which were particularly pertinent to me in my then dual, or even triple, role of therapist, participant and researcher. And so I chose to follow an emergent or inductive model (Bruscia 1995: 390) where the experience is paramount, methods of data collection and analysis may change, and hypotheses or theories may emerge from the process rather than dictating its course.

This rests easily within my philosophical framework of behaviourism (Skinner 1974; Watson 1931), with an integrated holistic view of a human organism, recognising consciousness and human experience as internal states that function in such a way as to provide foundational physiological stimulation that provokes complex conditioned responses previously acquired and shaped through environmental interactions. In my search for meaning, or rather, a philosophical view of the way meaning is produced within a specific context, behaviourism also shapes my choice of methodology in that I search for empirical data based on observable behaviours and then study this data for significant patterns which might indicate their underlying organisational factors, thus, lead to interpretation or explanation of why the women chose to behave as they did. If musical responses, in this case song choices, are defined as musical behaviours functioning as associative responses to past experiences and emotions, then an examination of the circumstances during present-day music therapy sessions in which responses are invoked and choices made, may reveal something not only of the women's lives but also of the nature of music as an active agent for structuring and transforming.

My path of enquiry therefore follows the tradition of a case study (Creswell 1998), investigating 'a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context' (Yin 2003: 13) with articulated design in the logical collection and analysis of empirical data. Although I worked originally with 10 women, my case study was narrowed to focus specifically on one woman, Angela[1]. She was in her thirties and had a dual diagnosis of mental illness and learning disability as well as several physical conditions. She also had a long history of violent behaviour, which now focussed around the tearing of her own clothes and the destruction of any object coloured red; she was obsessed with blue and would only dress in, and have possessions of, blue and white. She had been in psychiatric care since her teens and had recently moved out of a high-security hospital. She was now the only black woman in the unit.

Angela attended 121 out of a possible 136 group sessions over the course of three years. These were open groups, generally attended by two to five women, and lasting between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Sessions were based on an improvisational model, typically beginning with a greeting song and leading toward improvisation using percussion instruments, guitar and keyboard. However, content also frequently focussed on pre-composed songs, at the women's request. In my session notes I listed all occurrences of Angela's song 'choices', defined as those where she suggested a song or she chose to respond in a noticeable way to one played by me or another member of the group. This resulted in a total of 25 songs as shown in Figure 1.

Analysis

I analysed these song choices according to a modified version of Therapeutic Narrative Analysis (Aldridge & Aldridge 2002: 1-4). This is a flexible form of research design which is both heuristic and "hermeneutic […] concerned with the significance of human understandings and their interpretation" (Aldridge & Aldridge 2002: 4). In brief, data 'traces' (in this case the song lyrics and subsequently the metaphoric images bound within them) are described and interpreted at different levels of abstraction, and events or 'episodes' are linked together to form a narrative or story.

In the first stage of this cyclical process, the timeline of songs (as shown in Figure 1), was decontextualised or abstracted from a descriptive account of the therapy sessions and searched for

[1] For anonymity and confidentiality purposes, her real name has been disguised.

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patterns. It seemed immediately apparent to me that the pattern in Figure 1 bears a close resemblance to the classical Sonata Form, falling loosely into three sections, the first having only two songs, or themes, predominating; the second introducing, or perhaps developing a wealth of new material; and the final recapitulation section returning to a focus on two songs, with Song 22 perhaps reinstating the absent Song 1. Comparison with the dynamic thematic development which would be expected in an archetypal model of sonata form gave a structure that shaped my questioning, a process which is described in detail in my thesis (Chambers 2008: 201-204). Using this outline structure as a guide, the songs were recontextualised back into the chronological account of the therapy and into a biographical account of Angela's life experience. This allowed the formulation of subjective perceptions, sense-impressions of the focus of each song, which summarise in succinct form the quality or sensation, perhaps the 'feel' of the personal experience. These impressions were encapsulated into verbal or visible constructs in the form of metaphors or images, intended to be the least abstract form of representation which would provide objective data for further exploration. At this point it might be useful to clarify that these images are my subjective representations, that I was not aware of some of them during the therapy process itself and that they were rarely verbally interpreted directly back to Angela. Instead, I consider them to be an almost hidden presence, contained and developed within the music which carries the lyrics, but credible nonetheless, as trustworthy data for research, verified by the ongoing development of our mutual musical dialogue. Also, these sense-impressions were categorised into bi-polar constructs (such as 'good-bad'), opening up the data to further interpretation. This process of recontextualisation generated a synthesised research narrative and explicated a processional understanding of the music therapy. This linear, temporal treatment of the data is the modification which I made to Aldridge and Aldridge's (2002) design, which usually presents constructs according to spatial or hierarchical conceptual structures.

There follows a second stage of the cycle in which the metaphoric constructs themselves are decontextualised again and searched for further patterns at a deeper level of abstraction and are regrouped into themed categories, but these are not the focus of this paper. Here, I will return to the first cycle of research to begin to present some of my results.

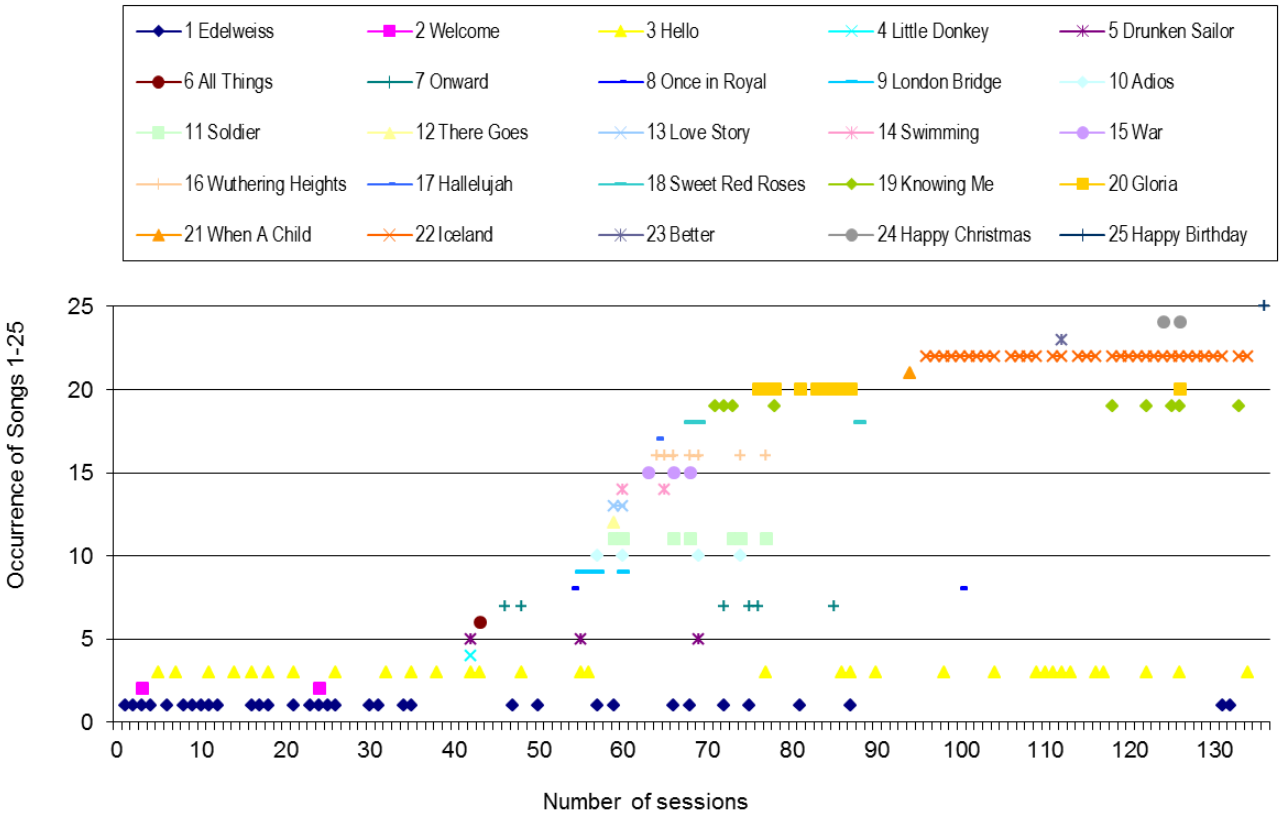

Figure 1: Timeline of songs

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Results

Song images

During the first cycle of recontextualisation I formed 12 sense-impressions in the form of metaphoric images, which summarise and make visible the themes from 12 of the 25 songs:

The Nun	*Mary on a donkey*	*The Drunken Sailor*
The Dentist	*A Fine Lady*	*A Soldier*
Swimming	*Red Roses*	*'Abba'*
'Gloria'	*Mother and Baby*	*Iceland*

Below I provide three short examples to show this process of image-creation:

Example 1: The Nun

This image was extricated from Song 1 *Edelweiss*[2]:

Edelweiss, Edelweiss, Ev'ry morning you greet me.
Small and white, clean and bright, you look happy to meet me
Blossom of snow, may you bloom and grow, bloom and grow forever.
Edelweiss, Edelweiss, bless my homeland forever.

On first impression the image could be the Edelweiss flower but Angela never used this word. She called the song "Nun music", presumably relating to the storyline of the musical and the nun, Maria, who became step-mother to a large family of children. This song was used initially to create an atmosphere of stillness and calm, being played repeatedly and precisely with no alterations. With its emphasis on 'greeting' and 'growing' it was imbued with Angela's aspirations towards acceptability, both socially in the group and personally, with a wish to be recognised, like a nun, as a 'good' person, experiences which were otherwise unattainable in her everyday life in the secure unit. Later on, we were able to relax our perfect re-creation of the song and make changes to it, adding our own improvisations, and it was used on a deeper level to express and to explore some of the bad experiences in her life, including her dilemmas with self-identity and racial abuse. It also led to the revelation that Angela, as a very young child, had been abandoned by her own mother and subsequently fostered: another link with Maria the nun, who can now be seen to represent the bi-polar construct of the Good-Bad mother figure.

Example 2: A Fine Lady

This image was extricated from Song 9 *London Bridge*[3], which had appeared in session 55:

> *London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down,*
> *London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady.*
> *Build it up with iron and steel, iron and steel, iron and steel,*
> *Build it up with iron and steel, my fair lady.*

Angela requested this song several weeks after being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, several episodes of actually physically falling down during the music therapy sessions, the gradual loss of her ability to walk, and finally her need to use a wheelchair. This song seemed to not only express the physical difficulties that she had faced, but also it gave her a chance to 'build up' her emotional support and recovery in recognising and accepting the practical assistance of the 'iron and steel' of the wheelchair, in ways that she was unable to express verbally. She called the song "My Fine Lady" and so the image depicted is the lady, not the bridge of the song title.

Example 3: The Soldier

Unlike the previous two examples, the figure of the Soldier, taken from Song 11 *Oh Soldier*[4] (from session 59), features in the song title and is one of the two main characters in the song.

> *"Oh soldier, soldier, won't you marry me, with your musket, fife and drum?"*
> *"Oh no sweet maid, I cannot marry thee, for I have no coat to put on."*
> *Then up she went to her grandfather's chest and got him a coat of the very, very best,*
> *She got him a coat of the very, very best, and the soldier put it on.*

There was nothing in Angela's life history that I could link to soldiers or marriage, yet she was very agitated by this song and would shout excitedly, "Soldier! Soldier!" hence the choice of this image. The underlying issue, however, turned out to be the clothes, or rather the soldier's lack of them. Angela had destroyed most of her own clothes and once, in session 41, had to borrow some in order to attend

[2] Rodgers & Hammerstein (1959). *The Sound of Music*, published by Williamson Music.

[3] Traditional. Anonymous (1956). *The Puffin Song Book* Harmondsworth: Puffin Books.

[4] Traditional. Anonymous (1985). *Strawberry Fair: 51 traditional songs.* London: A&C Black.

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the music therapy session. But now, over the course of three or four months, she painstakingly dressed the soldier in new and different clothes: trousers, a hat, a coat, and finally in "a smile". She grew in confidence as she manipulated the lyrics of the song, taking charge of the soldier's situation and, in the process, dealing with her own issues with clothes, colour, racial identity and aggressive behaviour. Angela's personal expression developed and we were able to improvise around a theme of marching. This influx of issues, and the growth from expression of aspirations to exploration of life struggles, reached a peak in session 60 when both *London Bridge* and *Soldier* were repeated several times, and Angela, in a moment of insight and clarity, was finally able to verbalise, "I can't walk, Carol".

Human figures as Proxies

During the second cycle these images were decontextualised from the songs and grouped together visually for the first time in order that patterns or episodes within them could be seen more clearly. (The twelve images can be seen here in Figure 2). In this simplistic presentation, one theme is immediately made clear – the images are overwhelmingly of human figures. Perhaps this should not be surprising as song lyrics are written by people, for people, and often portray human emotions and experiences. But in many of the songs the human figure is not the main character in the narrative and alternative symbols could have been chosen. However, the essential relevance of the chosen images is validated by the client's own words and by interpretative analysis of her experiences in and around the music therapy sessions.

What is common to these three songs (and the images constructed from them; see examples above), and many of the others, is that they are not necessarily great musical works but simple, perhaps almost inane, well-known traditional folk or children's songs. Their importance lies in this common cultural accessibility and social acceptability: every member of the music therapy group knew them and could participate in them to a greater or lesser extent. And the main characters are easily understood for they are archetypal figures to which we all can relate for we already know how a nun, a fine lady or a soldier is expected to feel and behave.

This was crucial for Angela in the process of presenting and manipulating her experiences, issues and emotions during the music therapy. She lacked sophisticated language use due to her pathology, learning disability, increasing physical difficulties with speech and, above all, due to her difficulties with social integration into the group. Many of the other women would not listen to Angela's attempts at verbal communication and they treated her with differing degrees of contempt. But mutual participation in song was acceptable at times, and this gave Angela the opportunity not only to be heard and listened to by the group, but to express her own emotions through the re-creation and re-performance of the songs. By relating to human figures, or through association with human emotions and experiences contained within the lyrics, Angela was able to explore and adapt her feelings and behaviours through the manipulation of the characters in the music. In effect, she used the metaphoric images as a form of Proxy, a substitute or agency acting on her behalf. These Proxies are humanised yet essentially depersonalised figures which display easily understood human emotions and behaviours but which negate any need for direct personal self-disclosure. Through their mutual creation and re-creation, Angela was able to test new ways of behaving, experience the formation of new successful social relationships and absorb new ideas and grow in her own confidence, self-identity and self-expression.

Reverse chronology

Such usage of Proxy in songs was not restricted to isolated incidents but was shown to be part of an ongoing creative process throughout the entire course of music therapy. During the second cycle of recontextualisation in the narrative analysis, plotting the occurrences of these images back into a chronological account of the therapy sessions and against a biographical account of Angela's life experiences resulted in Figure 2, which effectively portrays a soundtrack of Angela's life. Rolla (1993: 83) describes a 'soundtrack process' where clients choose personal memories of music and experiences and integrate them together on a recording to reveal and explore a synopsis of life. Ruud (1998: 82) refers to a soundtrack as "a map that helps to organise a sense of identity" and is therefore a musical structuring that functions in constructing personal meaning, locating incidents in time and space.

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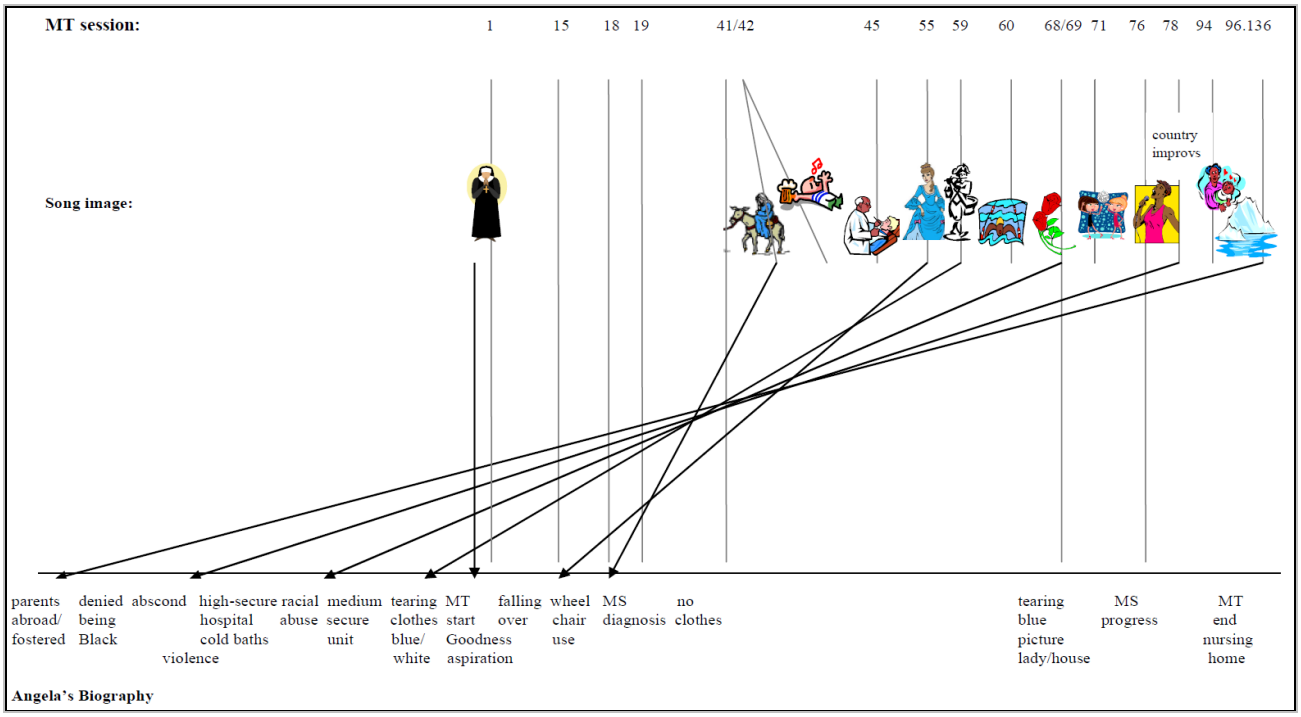

Figure 2: The life soundtrack / reverse chronology

Time was shown to be particularly important in my research. Figure 2 is a two-dimensional depiction of a three-dimensional temporal process in which, as the music therapy progresses chronologically forwards, the images relate to life experiences that are biographically increasingly further back in time, yet all relate to the present day and current activities in and around the therapy sessions. For example, the Proxy figure of the Nun relates to the present time at the start of therapy, with Angela's current aspirations towards goodness and acceptance. The *Fine Lady* from session 55 goes slightly back in time to relate to Angela's falling down and subsequent use of a wheelchair. And *The Soldier* presents issues which began before the start of music therapy, relating to her obsessions with colour and the tearing of her clothes. As this model takes account of the onward passage of time and the links between the events of the past and the current 'here-and-now' it results in an ongoing spiral or looped effect. I have described this crossover of temporal processes by the term 'Reverse Chronology'.

I am not suggesting that Angela is aware of these images, nor that she is deliberately using them. Indeed, as her therapist, I was not clearly aware of many of them until later in the research process. What I do assert, from the base of my theoretical framework of behaviourism, is that events in the present-day give rise to songs, and their respective metaphoric images, which have a direct association with previous life experiences. This process is one of conditioned responses whereby significant life events or strong feelings have become associated with the music of the time and either musical or emotional memories may then be resurrected at a later date as a direct response to a current stimulus of the same or similar music or emotions. This also contributes to an explanation for the preponderance of songs from childhood or from an earlier era. And what makes them most powerful and accessible are the culturally identifiable human figures contained within them; the Proxies that act as substitute speakers. As Angela journeyed back through the events of her early life, with one stimulus prompting another along the soundtrack trail, such figures had a structurally adaptive function, enabling her to relive, recreate and finally to transform her current understanding, patterns of behaviour and social relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the use of metaphoric Proxy images in song which are both humanised and depersonalised provides a cultural framework in which social, musical and therapeutic relationships based on equality of power and choice of decision-making can be successfully negotiated. This research has focussed on song lyrics, the images contained within them and the experiences which they express but, in constructing a personal narrative, in creating, recreating and expressing an individual's changing identity and insight, I assert that using songs is a constructive relational process. It is this use of 'Song', as a deeper transformative process rather than the actual product of the songs

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produced, which is important. And so, in this case, Song has become not only the means of therapy but also the structural foundation on which the methodology of analysis in the process of research is based.

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