

BOOK REVIEW

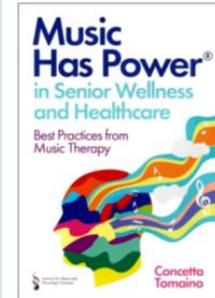
Music has power® in senior wellness and healthcare: Best practices from music therapy (Tomaino)

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Book information

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Introduction

Music has always been a central part of human life, used in rituals, celebrations, education and daily social interaction. In the twentieth century, research began to show that music could also be applied in clinical and therapeutic settings (Bruscia, 2014; Wheeler, 2015). Among the many fields of application, elderly care has become one of the most significant areas because of the rising number of older adults worldwide and the urgent need to support their health and quality of life (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015).

Concetta Tomaino is recognised as a leading figure in music therapy and neurological rehabilitation. With more than four decades of professional experience, she has worked with people living with dementia, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease and stroke. Her long collaboration with the neurologist Oliver Sacks brought international attention to the clinical use of music (Sacks, 2007; Sacks & Tomaino, 1991). In 2023, Tomaino published *Music Has Power® in Senior Wellness and Healthcare: Best Practices from Music Therapy*. This book integrates scientific research with clinical practice, offering strategies for therapists, nurses, carers and family members who wish to use music as a tool for care and wellbeing.

The aim of this review is to summarise the main themes of Tomaino's book, evaluate its contribution to the field and discuss how her ideas can be applied in elderly care. The review will also highlight the strengths and limitations of the work and suggest possible directions for future research and practice. In doing so, it underlines the importance of music therapy as part of person-centred models of healthcare for older adults (Kitwood, 1997; McDermott et al., 2014).

Book overview

Tomaino's *Music Has Power® in Senior Wellness and Healthcare* is a comprehensive guide to the use of music in elderly care. The book is written for music therapists, healthcare professionals and carers, but it is also accessible to families who wish to improve the wellbeing of older adults through music.

The central idea of the book is that music can act as a powerful tool to support health and daily life for seniors. Tomaino explains that music can enhance memory, improve mood, reduce anxiety and increase social engagement in older people. These claims are consistent with many studies in the field of music therapy that show positive outcomes for elderly populations (McDermott et al., 2014; Särkämö et al., 2013).

The book is divided into sections that reflect both theory and practice. It begins with an overview of how the brain processes music and how neurological changes in ageing can be addressed through musical interventions. This is followed by practical chapters on the use of singing, rhythm, movement and guided listening with elderly patients. These techniques are presented with case studies from Tomaino's long career, offering real examples of how music can make a difference in daily care (Sacks & Tomaino, 1991).

Another important part of the book is its discussion of dementia and Alzheimer's disease. Tomaino shows that music can help to stimulate memory and communication even when language skills are severely reduced. This aligns with findings that music can activate preserved neural pathways in people with dementia (Baird & Samson, 2015; van der Steen et al., 2018).

The final chapters focus on the role of music therapy in broader healthcare contexts, including palliative care, community health and support for families. Tomaino suggests that music is not only a clinical tool but also a way to strengthen human connection and dignity at the end of life. This holistic view reflects current approaches in person-centred care models (Kitwood, 1997; Ridder et al., 2013).

One of the strongest contributions of Tomaino's book is the clear explanation of how music therapy can be applied in the daily care of older adults. The text combines clinical examples with scientific evidence, showing that music can affect both the brain and behaviour in meaningful ways. Tomaino also highlights how singing or listening to music from earlier life stages can strengthen autobiographical memory and improve social interaction. Similar results have been reported in studies with people who have Alzheimer's disease, where music sessions supported memory recall and reduced agitation (Gómez & Gómez, 2017; van der Steen et al., 2018).

Music therapy is widely used for people with dementia to maintain communication when language skills decline. Tomaino provides case studies showing that rhythm, melody and shared singing allow patients to express themselves non-verbally. Reviews confirm that music therapy can improve mood, reduce behavioural problems and support quality of life for people with dementia (McDermott et al., 2014; Raglio et al., 2015).

Another area explored in the book is the role of rhythm and movement in neurorehabilitation. Rhythmic auditory stimulation has been shown to improve motor function and walking ability in people with Parkinson's disease (Pacchetti et al., 2000; Thaut et al., 1996). Tomaino discusses how rhythmic exercises, drumming and coordinated singing can support rehabilitation after stroke, helping to restore speech and mobility (Särkämö et al., 2014).

Beyond neurological outcomes, music therapy is effective in reducing anxiety, depression and loneliness in elderly populations. Group singing in care homes, for example, has been linked to higher levels of wellbeing and social connection (Creech et al., 2013). Tomaino emphasises that music can create joy and community, especially for seniors who may face isolation or loss. The use of personalised playlists and live music sessions has been shown to lower stress and improve sleep quality among older adults (Garcia-Gil et al., 2020; Vink et al., 2011).

Overall, Tomaino's *Music Has Power®* offers a rich mix of theory, clinical evidence and practical examples. The book demonstrates how music therapy can be integrated into elderly care and shows the broad value of music for health. However, like any work, it has both strong points and areas that can be improved.

Strengths

One clear strength of the book is the combination of scientific research with real case studies. Tomaino does not rely only on theory but presents stories of patients she has worked with over the years, which makes the ideas more relatable and convincing (Tomaino, 2023). This approach reflects the wider trend in music therapy research that values both qualitative and quantitative outcomes (Bradt & Dileo, 2014; Wheeler, 2015).

Another strength is the clear focus on neurological foundations. The book explains how music influences brain function, and this is supported by a growing body of neuroscience literature showing that musical activity engages motor, emotional and memory systems (Särkämö & Sihvonen, 2018; Zatorre & Salimpoor, 2013). This helps make the case for using music therapy as part of evidence-based healthcare.

Limitations and gaps

Despite its strengths, the book is strongly based on North American clinical practice. This makes it less clear how the recommendations may apply in other cultural or healthcare settings. Studies in non-Western countries suggest that cultural familiarity with specific songs and musical styles is important for therapeutic success (Chan et al., 2012; Kang et al., 2010). More attention to global perspectives could make the book even more inclusive.

Another limitation is the limited discussion of economic and policy challenges. While Tomaino shows that music therapy has many benefits, the book does not fully address issues such as funding, staff training and integration of music therapy into public health systems. Research shows that sustainability and cost-effectiveness are key factors for long-term adoption of music therapy in healthcare (Daykin et al., 2018; Gold et al., 2012).

Implications for research and practice

Tomaino's book encourages further research in several areas. Building on her insights and previous studies (Hsu et al., 2015; McHugh et al., 2021; van der Steen et al., 2018), more randomised controlled trials are needed to measure the impact of music therapy on elderly populations. Cross-cultural studies could also help to adapt methods for diverse groups. Further work should explore how digital technologies and personalised playlists can extend the reach of music therapy in home-based and community care.

Conclusion

Tomaino's *Music Has Power® in Senior Wellness and Healthcare* provides a unique and accessible resource for understanding how music therapy can support older adults in clinical and daily life contexts. By combining neuroscience, clinical experience and practical strategies, the book makes a strong case for music as a vital tool in healthcare. It shows that music can help memory, improve mood, encourage movement and build social connection for seniors, even in the face of serious neurological conditions.

Overall, Tomaino's work reminds us that music is not only art but also a source of healing and dignity. It highlights the potential of music therapy as part of person centred care and offers practical guidance for therapists, carers and families. In a time when societies face rapid ageing populations, this message is both urgent and hopeful.

Author information

Behnam Khodarahmi is a music researcher, member of the British Associate for Music Therapy (BAMT), composer, and arranger with over 20 years of experience across artistic and academic fields. He is the author of several books and research articles in both English and Persian, focusing on the cultural dimensions of music therapy. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Music and Management, and a Master's degree in Creative Industries Futures. As a volunteer music therapist and globally award-winning musician, he explores the power of sound and creativity to enhance emotional well-being and promote cross-cultural healing.

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Author contributions

Behnam Khodarahmi: Conceptualization; Writing - original draft; Writing – review & editing.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) usage

AI tools were used solely for language related support and technical assistance during the preparation of this book review. Specifically, Grammarly, Gemini, and Perplexity were used for proofreading, grammatical correction, improving textual consistency, and checking the alignment and formatting of references. No AI tools were used for content generation, analysis, or interpretation and all intellectual contributions and final decisions remain the sole responsibility of the author.

Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to report.

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