

ARTICLE

“Medicine for the soul” – Older men’s identity performance and affect attunement through music listening

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ABSTRACT

The wellbeing of older men is an understudied, yet urgent research topic. After retirement, men may lose their social networks and professional identity, which can lead to loneliness, depression, and a heightened risk for suicide. These problems are worsened by a reluctance amongst many men to seek help. Existing social support systems are oftentimes not customised to older men’s needs and interests. Previous studies suggest that music can play a significant role for the social and emotional wellbeing of older men. Therefore, a music listening group was set up to explore how music listening can serve as a wellbeing resource for older men. Eight men 64-86 years old met to listen to and discuss music of their own choice, with a trained music therapist (first author) as the group leader. Focusing on the participants’ identity performances, a deductive thematic analysis was conducted, guided by Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective of frontstage-backstage, Stern’s theories on vitality affect, and masculinity theory. The participants performed their identities mainly in line with traditional masculinities in their verbal frontstage performances, revealing ambivalent masculine identities, while using music to connect to, experience and express other, more “sentient” backstage identities which surpass traditional norms. The music chosen was characterised by the participants’ curiosity and openness to learning about new music. The results have implications for music therapy in highlighting the wellbeing needs of older men and music’s many aesthetic and wellbeing potentials for this hitherto understudied group.

KEYWORDS

older men,
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INTRODUCTION

With the increase of an ageing population all over the Western world, many music therapists will find themselves working with older people. Therefore, more knowledge is needed about wellbeing in old age (Segall, 2020). Particularly with regards to the wellbeing of older men, there is a lack of research both in gerontology, studies on men and masculinities, and studies on music and wellbeing (Lindblad, 2021; Lindblad & de Boise, 2020). Since men often identify with their occupations, retirement can imply a loss of meaning and position, which can lead to loneliness, depression and ultimately even suicide (Addis, 2008; Branney & White, 2018; Holwerda et al., 2012). Also, many men tie their identities to their bodies, which means that bodily changes connected to ageing such as loss of strength, sexual potency and hair, can be experienced as threats to the masculine identity (Calasanti & King, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Thompson, 2019). Engagement in meaningful activities and interests can be important ways for older men to redefine their masculine identity and improve wellbeing (Arber et al., 2003; Athanasiadis et al., 2017; Jackson, 2016). However, there is a reluctance amongst many men to seek help or participate in social support groups (Addis, 2008; Emslie et al., 2006; Featherstone et al., 2007; Holwerda et al., 2012). Social activities and support groups, both with and without music, are mostly attended by women (Clift et al., 2010; Cohen, 2009; Creech et al., 2013; Featherstone et al., 2007; Robinson et al., 2017). The hesitance amongst men to seek help is theoretically understood as tied to norms of masculinity not to show weakness or vulnerability or appear as feminine or a “sissy” (Holwerda et al., 2012; Robertson et al., 2016; Seidler, 2006, 2007). Therefore, learning more about the needs and interests of older men is crucial in order to develop social activities that men may find helpful and conducive to their masculine sense of identity.

At the same time, engagement with music is observed as a ubiquitous and effective means to increase engagement with life and enhance wellbeing for older people. Older people have reported that the main reasons why they listened to music was because it was beautiful, gave them pleasure and for entertainment (Laukka, 2007). When comparing the functions of music listening in the lives of younger and older adults, Groarke and Hogan (2016) found that whereas younger adults emphasised affect regulation and social connection, older adults more often listened alone, experiencing transcendence and indirect social connection and a sense of cultural, collective belonging also to those physically absent; dear ones, those who like the same kind of music, or others with whom they identified. Thus, music listening can be invaluable as a substitute for social contact in times of loneliness and isolation, and serve as a surrogate for social relatedness (Elvers et al., 2018).

Music can afford a sense of vitality, of “being alive,” through evoking a wide range of emotional nuances (Ruud, 2017). This may be particularly important for (older) men who are often socialised into suppressing emotions, sometimes leading to detachment from emotional life, which is detrimental for mental health (Rowan, 1997; Seidler, 2006). Different kinds of engagement with music – singing, dancing, playing and listening – have been noted to support the wellbeing of older men in offering an “asylum,” where they can connect to, experience and express their emotional lives without jeopardising their frontstage performances of traditional masculinity (Hays & Minichiello, 2005; Lindblad, 2021). An active interest in music can also generate a sense of cultural belongingness and enhanced self-esteem through cultivating and sharing knowledge about music

(de Vries, 2010; Lindblad, 2021).

This article is based on a research study which was previously presented elsewhere (Lindblad, 2021), regarding a music listening group with eight socially vulnerable older men, who met 16 times to listen to music of their own choice and discuss self-defined topics in connection to the music listening. In the previous article, which focused on the communication patterns in the group, an unexpected discrepancy was noted between how the participants presented and performed their identities during the group sessions, and what they disclosed about themselves in individual follow up interviews. In short, while the discussions in the group were focused on facts about the music and the artists, and a general avoidance of self-disclosure, the interviews were more intimate and personal, revealing both positive and negative life experiences connected to music. Many described childhood experiences of parental alcoholism, suicide and emotional deprivation, and how they had taken their refuge in music. They also attested to having life challenges of their own around loneliness and in some cases anxiety and depression. Very little of this was revealed during the group sessions, which were generally light-hearted and filled with laughter and jokes. This discrepancy called for further analysis from the point of view of performed identities.

Music, identity and wellbeing

In the research field of music and health, authors have noted that positive musical experiences can support wellbeing through strengthening a positive self-identity (Ansdell, 2013; Batt-Rawden, 2010; Croom, 2015; DeNora, 2013, 2017; Lilliestam, 2013; MacDonald et al., 2017; Ruud, 2013). Importantly, "identity" is not a fixed trait but a constant process, "exchangeable, tradable and stealable," as DeNora (2017, p. 47) puts it. Each person has access to multiple identities, performed differently in different contexts (Barrett, 2017; Blumer, 1969; Frith, 1996), and also developing and changing throughout the life course.

The terms "identity" and "self" are defined differently in different scientific traditions and contexts, and sometimes used interchangeably. Some differentiate between social and personal identities (Schwartz et al., 2011) whereas others claim that this division is false since there are no individual positions outside of a social context (Frosh et al., 2003). In connection to music and wellbeing, some authors use the combined concept "sense of self-identity" (Baker & Ballantyne, 2013; Hays & Minichiello, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2017; Ruud, 2013).

Music can strengthen a personal sense of "this is me" and a cultural, collective sense of "this is us" (Hesmondhalgh, 2008, 2013). Identities are shaped both by how people define themselves, and how they are defined by others (Frosh et al., 2003). Identities are performed through people's actions, "we 'do' who we are" (Aldridge, 2005, p. 39), which means that musical engagement can offer an opportunity to perform alternative identities:

This shift from my being a patient to considering myself a creative artist is itself a health generating performance of self and closely related to the generation of personal identity (Aldridge, 2005, p. 4).

A person's musical tastes and sense of musicality can be parts of their expressed identity, for instance being someone who likes heavy metal or opera, or someone who likes to sing in the shower

(MacDonald et al., 2017). The idols of the teen ages play a considerable role in the formation of identity (Frith, 1996), but also amongst older people music can strengthen wellbeing through evoking memories, which can contribute to forming a personal life history, thus supporting a sense of continuity and strengthening both individual and collective identities (Elliott & Silverman, 2017; Frith, 1996; Ruud, 2012, 2013, 2017; Trevarthen & Malloch, 2017; Volgsten & Pripp, 2016). However, memories are not always experienced as positive in old age, since they can be reminders of painful past experiences or that life is no longer what it used to be (DeNora, 2000; Hesmondhalgh, 2013). Therefore, it is important to note that wellbeing in old age can also be supported by the discovery of *new* music, which enhances personal growth through forming new associations and new memories (Groarke & Hogan, 2016; Lamont, 2017).

Although it is more common to describe playing instruments and singing as expressions of someone's self-identity (Frith, 1996; MacDonald et al., 2017), musical preferences of recorded music can also be regarded as narrative expressions of a person:

Clearly, people have always expressed, "performed," and "composed" their first-person narratives through songs and the texts of choral music. The same applies to instrumental musics that are open to a vast range of emotional – personal interpretations. This interpretive openness allows listeners to feel and embody themselves in the sounds, spaces, performers, and relationships of instrumental musics that, in turn, mirror, portray, validate, invalidate, *and otherwise express their first-person narratives* (Elliott & Silverman, 2017, p. 29, italics added).

This intersubjective process between the listener and the music can be theoretically understood as similar to the affect attunement that occurs between an infant and a parent, as described by Stern (2000). The process has been characterised as "proto-musical," meaning that music is social at its roots (Volgsten, 2012, 2019a, 2019b; Volgsten & Pripp, 2016). Constituted by variations in intensity, rhythm, shape, sound and timing, the dynamic forms of vitality in music interacts with the flow of experience of the listener in a "mediated quasi-interaction" (Volgsten, 2019b), both confirming and challenging the sense of self in a "me – not-me" process similar to the parent's affective interaction with the infant. In a similar vein, music's role in music therapy has been suggested to "hold, shape, and structure inner experiences" in ways similar to a mother's care for a child (Wärja, 1999). Thus, it is through the interactive, dynamic process of attuning affectively to the similarities and differences of the affective qualities in the music, that the music can be experienced as an expression either of "me" (DeNora, 2000, 2013; Ruud, 2013), or "you" or an "other" (Volgsten, 2012, 2019a, 2019b; Volgsten & Pripp, 2016), or an intersubjective sense of "self-and-other" (Elliott & Silverman, 2017). Importantly, it is not only music that is previously known to the person that can afford these experiences (Gabrielsson, 2008, 2010; Grocke & Wigram, 2007).

Purpose and research question

In this article we explore how music may relate to older men's performed identities in different types of situations, individually and collectively, and what implications this might have for their wellbeing.

The specific research question is: *What types of identities are formed, performed and transformed by older men with an active interest in music, individually and in group settings?*

METHOD

The group started as an offspring of an ongoing research project with life history groups at a daycentre for older, socially and economically vulnerable, people. Since mostly women attended those groups, the centre had an interest in learning more about how to attract men into social support groups. It was assumed that music might serve that purpose. Thus, the group had the double aim to offer the male guests at the centre a social activity with music, and to generate empirical materials for the research study.

Participation

The participants were eight men 64-86 years old, living in Sweden, recruited from the day centre (five) and also from an open psychiatric centre (three), since not enough participants had initially volunteered. Educational background varied from elementary school to bachelor studies. One was married, two had relationships living apart together, two were divorced with no new relationship, one was a widower, two were never married. Three had no children, five had children and grandchildren.

All participants shared an interest in music, covering different styles and genres and ranging from seeing it as an everyday diversion to lifesaving. Two had previously sung in a choir, three had played the piano, two had played the guitar. One still sang in a choir and one continued to play the piano regularly. Several had been keen on social dancing. None of them were or had been professional musicians (see Table 1 for further information about all participants).

Procedure

The group was framed as a “life history group with music” and led by a trained music therapist (first author). The setting was supportive rather than therapeutic, with the idea of giving the participants agency by letting them form the sessions in accordance with their interests. Therefore, there was neither a fixed manual for the sessions, nor specific themes or instructions. The only instructions given were that the participants could choose any piece of music they wanted, from any genre, and say something about why that piece was important to them.

Since potentially sensitive topics around mental health and/or social vulnerability were expected to be raised, ethical approval was applied for and granted by the regional ethical review board of Uppsala, Sweden (Dnr. 2017/191). The participants were informed about confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was given by all participants. All names in the article are pseudonyms. Both during the group, and after it was finished, the group leader was available for personal counselling, actively offering personal support (which, however, was politely declined).

After eight sessions, an evaluative focus group was conducted covering questions on how the participants had experienced being in the group. After having ended the entire group process,

individual follow up interviews were carried out with all participants, covering questions about missing information such as details about their former occupation and family situations, and previous and current engagement with music outside of the group.

Name, year of birth	Education / former occupation	Background	Current family	Musical engagement and tastes
Arne, 1939	Seven years of elementary school. Three years practical education.	Grew up in the countryside. Both parents worked at a mansion with farming.	Widower. One daughter and grandchildren.	No active music making. Used to go out dancing. Liked country and western, Swedish songs and some light classics, such as Vivaldi and Vienna waltzes. Chose e.g: Waylon Jennings: <i>Good Hearted Woman</i> , Johnny Cash: <i>Riders in the Sky</i> and Antonio Vivaldi: <i>The Spring</i> .
Carl, 1944	Self-employed dentist.	Grew up in an estate owned by his parents. One sister.	Married since 50 years. Two sons. Grandchildren.	Still played the piano at home, classically inspired improvisations. Vast repertoire, mainly classical music. Chose, for example, Norah Jones: <i>Sunrise</i> , Jacques Loussier Trio: <i>Bach Prelude in C major</i> , R Strauss: <i>Morgen</i> with Jessye Norman, Bernstein: <i>Somewhere</i> from <i>West Side Story</i> , and Beethoven: <i>Violin Concerto</i> .
David, 1942	Worked as economist, 15 years as "house husband," later self-employed.	Born in the USA. Father state official. Mother housewife, engaged in charity work. One sister.	Divorced. Two children, grandchildren.	Still sang in a choir. Chose mainly American jazz, such as Duke Ellington: <i>Take the "A" Train</i> , Count Basie: <i>April in Paris</i> , Les Paul & Mary Ford: <i>How High the Moon</i> , but also João Gilberto: <i>Desafinado</i> and F Sartori: <i>Con te partiro</i> with Andrea Bocelli.
Lasse, 1945	Language teacher, later self-employed in sales.	Grew up in a small town. Father typographer, mother housewife. One brother.	Divorced. One son. No grandchildren. Love relationship: living apart together.	Used to played the piano and go out dancing. Vast repertoire, all genres, preferred slow "sentimental" music. Chose e.g. Ch Chaplin: <i>Smile</i> with Judy Garland, Metallica: <i>Unforgiven III</i> , M Jarre: <i>Lara's theme</i> from <i>Doctor Zhivago</i> , Quincy Jones & Harry Arnolds orch: <i>Midnight Sun Never Sets</i> and Massenet: <i>Méditation</i> from <i>Thaïs</i> .
Palle, 1931	Seven years of elementary school plus lower engineering education.	Grew up in the countryside. Father electrician, mother seamstress. One brother (dead).	Divorced. No children. Living alone.	Used to go out dancing. Preferred Swedish songs, Frank Sinatra and big band jazz. Chose e.g. Frank Sinatra: <i>Fly me to the moon</i> and <i>New York, New York</i> , and <i>Misty</i> with Sarah Vaughan.
Simon, 1947	Worked as a doctor's secretary.	Grew up in big city. Father manager, mother housewife. One sister.	No current relationship. One sister.	Used to play the piano and the guitar, and composed songs earlier in his life. Extensive repertoire, all genres. Chose music that cheered him up or comforted him, such as Vocal Point: <i>Nearer, o God, to Thee</i> , Mad Hatters: <i>Feeling good</i> , Beethoven: <i>Szene am Bach</i> from Symphony no 6 or D Shostakovich: <i>Waltz no 2</i> .

(Table 1 continued)

Ulf, 1946	Educated journalist, lawyer, periodically worked in those areas.	Grew up in villa suburb. Father postman and hobby painter. Mother secretary.	Divorced. Children and grandchildren. Current love relationship.	Used to sing in a choir and play some guitar. Liked music in a general way, did not define any specific taste. Chose e.g. Jefferson Airplane: <i>Somebody to love</i> , J Strauss: <i>Emperor's Waltz</i> , Screamin' Jay Hawkins. <i>I put a spell on you</i> , C Orff: <i>Carmina Burana</i> , and Trad: <i>O Come, o Come Immanuel</i> .
Åke, 1954	University exams in mathematics and Roman and Slavic languages. Periodically worked as a university lecturer.	Father chief physician, mother teacher in English and Swedish. Three and a "half" siblings.	Never married, no children, no current love relationship.	No active music making. Had recently started to listen to classical music and used to explore the internet for new discoveries. Chose, for example, Schubert: <i>Op 100 E flat major</i> , middle movement, G Mahler: <i>Adagietto</i> from Symphony no 5, Vladimir Vysotsky: <i>Koni Priveredlivye</i> , Leo Ferré: <i>C'est extra</i> and R Wagner: <i>Prelude to Tannhäuser</i> .

Table 1: Participant profiles

Material and analysis

The materials consist of the transcripts from the group sessions, the focus group and the individual follow up interviews. It also includes a written form that the participants filled in four times about their self-rated wellbeing, including questions about stress, anxiety and loneliness, but also positive experiences such as feeling hopeful, relaxed or content. The written forms were not analysed separately but only used for triangulation, checking for significant divergences from the information given in the group sessions and interviews. Since the first author was the group leader and thereby also a participant observer (Creswell, 2013), the materials also contain field notes from the sessions.

All the sessions and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, including notes of sighs, silences, laughter and similar non-verbal expressions. The analysis was thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006), deductively emerging from the results in the previous article which focused on communication patterns (Lindblad, 2021). Due to the discrepancy noted in the former analysis between how the participants performed their identities collectively and individually, in this article we were specifically looking for aspects of identity performance, using three theoretical perspectives: i) Symbolic interactionism, particularly Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective on "frontstage" and "backstage," with DeNora's (2013) expanded understanding of the backstage position in relation to music where she suggests a third position where the hidden aspects of the self can come to the fore through musical expression; ii) The concepts of affect attunement and vitality affects (forms of vitality) as outlined by Stern (2000, 2010), and adapted to musical communication (Volgsten, 2012, 2019a, 2019b); iii) Theories on men and masculinities, particularly regarding norms of masculinity not to show emotions of weakness and vulnerability (Featherstone et al., 2007; Galasiński, 2004; Seidler, 2006, 2007).

RESULTS

The participants' music listening practices in everyday life were mostly solitary, and they all

motivated their participation in the group with an expressed desire to share their interest in music with others. Some of them emphasised that not being able to share this significant interest of theirs added to a feeling of loneliness, while others described music as a rewarding substitute for friendships, offering company, solace and support in their lives.

Developing musical tastes and expanding knowledge

Initially, the participants seemed to both seek a connection with each other and position themselves as individuals by comparing which artists they liked, which concerts they had attended in the past and which radio programs they used to listen to. They identified each other from the point of view of their musical tastes, noting who liked pop or blues and who preferred classical music or jazz. Since many of them were musically omnivorous, these musical identities were not clear-cut.

Importantly, their tastes and preferences were not only tied to the past but changing and expanding. For instance, Carl, who was brought up with classical music in an upper class family, bought Beethoven's *Violin Concerto* as his first record when 16 years old and had not heard of the Beatles until past 20. As a grown-up, he had turned more towards liking popular music, and presented himself to the group with Norah Jones as his first choice. Conversely, Arne and Palle, who were brought up as neighbours and childhood friends in working class families in the countryside, described how they used to despise classical music in their youth. Arne often returned to a narrative about how his tastes had changed towards an increased liking of classical music:

When you heard it on the radio when you were young, you just: "What is that awful noise, turn it off!" [laughter in the group]. And they played the *violin* and stuff like that – real loud! But with age when I have become more grown up, and, if you can say that, more mature, I started to like it more. There is a lot of nice music, I think, although I am quite ignorant in that field. Totally ignorant, one might say. But I like Vienna waltzes and such music a lot, especially the dances. That's damned nice, I think.

In this quote, it is interesting to note how Arne reinforces how ignorant he is about classical music although he likes it, seemingly as a way to safeguard not to lose face in potential future discussions. Knowledge about the music, artists and musicians seemed to be a highly valued asset in the group and the participants recurrently positioned themselves in terms of who knew the most. They frequently turned to the group leader with factual questions, and sometimes seemed to compete with the group leader in telling and presenting facts. Some chose rare pieces or artists that they wanted the others to learn about, and one admitted that choosing was particularly challenging because he put a demand on himself to choose pieces that were "special."

In contrast to what had been expected, the participants rarely presented their choices with personal stories tied to the music, but mostly focused on facts about the music and/or the artists. On rare occasions when personal stories were revealed, they were mostly not acknowledged by the others who instead commented on the music, often in positive terms such as "how beautiful" or just "wow," but sometimes also with negative or dismissive comments such as "I hate female voices," or "I could definitely live without this music".

Mannish boys

The participants revealed conflicting and ambivalent attitudes towards men in general, alternately talking about men with a diminishing and condescending attitude, idealising artists' and composers' traditionally masculine behaviours such as living hazardously, drinking, showing physical strength and seducing women, and discussing different positions with regards to the ongoing #metoo movement. On the one hand, some of them talked admiringly about how Mick Jagger still jumps around on stage despite being past 70 and drinking a bottle of whisky a day, or how Jussi Björling was "a devil at arm wrestling." On the other hand, they expressed concern and empathy towards stories of tragic fates such as alcohol or drug problems, suicide and violent deaths of artists, problems which many of them could identify with personally.

In a discussion on why more men are not interested in going out dancing, the participants noted that men are "cowardly as hell," fat, overweight, with beer bellies and just sit at home watching sports. These descriptions seemed to refer to "the others," men in general, since many of the participants had been keen dancers both as students and later in life. Recurrently, they discussed the bands and the dance halls, comparing experiences from the role play of inviting a girl to dance, the hopes and disappointments. This was often related in a cheerful tone, as funny stories:

Carl: Yeah, and then you invited her to dance. And then you felt, sort of – it needed to be a slow piece! [laughter] - and then you pushed a little, to see if there was any response [yes!], squeezed the hand a little, if you got a squeeze back, aha, then you were on the right track [laughter], and then you thought: How shall this end? It evokes memories, it does.

Palle: Yes, that's exactly how it was!

Ulf: I was rather cock sure when I was young, so I always went for the prettiest girl. If I didn't get her, I went home and cried [U laughs, common laughter]. So once I thought I'd go for the second prettiest instead, but when I told her "I want to dance with you because you are the second prettiest girl here tonight" [laughter]...

Åke: What did she answer to that?

Ulf: She looked at me: "I won't dance with you and if you think carefully you will know why". [...] I never did that again, I was totally destroyed, and went home and cried – alone [laughter].

Here, the participants present themselves as virile and courting, keeping their masculine pride even when being rejected. The first quote is of particular note in its sensuous and embodied choice of words. Frequently, the participants described their musical experiences with references to the body, such as the pleasure of listening "with the entire body" to music on a loud volume, in the car or at home, sometimes also singing along with the music. Ulf once chose a heavy blues with Screamin' Jay Hawkins, *I Put a Spell on You*, which was appreciated by most participants for its power, although experienced by Åke as expressive of hatred and threat. Also, listening to loud, high climactic tones by the opera tenors Luciano Pavarotti, Andrea Bocelli or Jussi Björling, generated comments such as "beautiful," "mighty" or "powerful as hell".

Occasional allusions to sex were made, such as after having listened to Ravel's *Bolero*, which many of them seemed to have listened to in previous, sexually charged, situations hinted at more or less overtly:

Carl: Unfortunately, I get bad associations to this... I saw a film once, which was basically a couple making love to this music, no more, no less, from beginning to end.

[laughter]

Group leader: And that was a bad association?

Carl: Well, it disturbs me because it takes the focus from the music.

Ulf: Yeah... no... I used to fall asleep well to this one, because we used to put it on at bedtime.

Simon: ...and..?

[silence]

Arne: Was it possible to sleep to this piece?

Ulf: No. That was exactly the point. [Simon laughs]. You slept well afterwards. [...]

Arne: I have a lot of nice experiences with this piece, from the time I was young and married [laughs].

Group leader: Ok...? But do you guys mean that you have used it while actually...?

Arne: [interrupts] Yes, yes, used it, I used to listen to it the first time then, yes. [...]

Carl: It's like a schoolbook in training, then, how one can learn to "hold it in" [common laughter].

There was a bewilderment to this whole passage, seemingly filled both with embarrassment and an urge to position oneself as sexually active or perhaps formerly sexually active.

With regards to women and the #metoo movement, they noted with concern that Leonard Cohen had been a "womaniser." In connection to listening to the French schlager *Je t'aime*, they commented that the male singer and composer Serge Gainsbourg would probably "go to jail these days" for his behaviour towards women. Furthermore, the story in Puccini's *Turandot*, where Calaf reassures *Turandot* that he will not force himself upon her, rendered comments that he had "the right attitude for our times." Some of the participants showed concern regarding how to behave towards women and be a "gentleman," whether it was still allowed to open a door for a woman, or to give her a hug. Notably, these discussions were actualised through the music chosen during the group sessions, giving the participants opportunities to collectively reflect upon and re-evaluate their masculinities in relation to women, taking different stands and trying different positions.

Every man is an island

The issue of loneliness was rarely discussed in the group, only in the individual follow up interviews. However, a shared experience of outsider-ship was actualised once, through the memories evoked by listening to Roy Orbison. While some remembered the shame from being a poor, working class boy in a middle class school without enough money to buy records or go to concerts with friends, others

had the opposite experience from being a middle or upper class boy in a working class community, describing the bullying and sense of alienation deriving from the differences in manners, values, and interests. Although their class backgrounds varied, they shared the experience of being an outsider and not part of the community. This is important in relation to the issue of loneliness in old age, since it suggests that it may have been a lifelong issue, rather than simply an effect of retirement.

In the individual follow up interview with Simon, he elaborated on his experiences of loneliness, describing himself as an “outsider” even in his own family; a shy and sensitive boy who took his refuge to music, playing the piano and the guitar by himself, composing over a hundred songs and listening to all kinds of music. For him, music had been literally lifesaving in times of deep depression and suicide attempts. Due to nine years of severe bullying in school, he had become wary of people and lived a lonely life. With age he had reconciled with his life history. In the group, he made some attempts to share personal stories, but when the group did not respond to his narratives, he settled with presenting his choices with short comments such as: “I like this piece,” “it cheers me up” or “it comforts me.” Interestingly, he emphasised in the interview that what he had particularly valued about the group, was the possibility to *express* himself emotionally, which contrasted with other social situations with men. In other words, he regarded the music he chose as emotional expressions of himself. However, he lamented the lack of responsiveness from the other participants.

Also, for Carl, music was a lifeline, the best therapy he could wish for and even his “best friend.” However, although he longed for someone to share his interest with, he described interaction with other people as unreliable and disturbing for him. In the interview he narrated how this affected his relationship with his wife:

We cannot meet, like you and I can, talking about music, there is not the same contact. When I play the piano, I feel alone. She is jealous of my grand piano. She wants to be the best at everything, and here I know something that she doesn't know. So when I play, she comes in and says: “you can't sit here and just indulge yourself, come and do something useful,” and then she bangs the lid on my fingers. That has happened several times. Quite brutal. And it makes me feel really alone against... sort of... music is almost the only thing that keeps me alive.

Thus, this is an example of how music can also increase the experience of loneliness in relation to other people.

In some cases, certain music was affectively related to a significant other. For instance, Lasse, who chose *Unforgiven III* by Metallica, had discovered this band through his only son who was now grown-up and busy making a career in IT, which made his father proud but also sad since they rarely got to see each other. A different father and son narrative was told by Åke in the individual follow up interview, where he elaborated on his “emotionally barren” childhood and parents incapable of showing empathy and emotional warmth. On rare occasions his father would read bedtime stories, whereas his mother hardly ever gave him a hug. He remembered his father smoking in the living room while listening to Bach and Mozart, and playing Puccini's *Tosca* to dinner. Recounted with a marked sigh, the first records that Åke bought when moving into an apartment of his own years later

was music by Bach and Mozart, adding with a self-ironic laughter, “maybe I bought Puccini, too”.

However, in the group, Åke mainly presented himself with French and Russian music, since he had positive memories tied to these countries. For instance, he once chose *Koni Priveredlivye* with Vladimir Vysotsky, a song which gave him “goose bumps all over,” about a man who whips his horses in full speed towards an abyss, while begging them to slow down. Musically, the song is in minor key, with an energetic, trotting underlying rhythm, whereas the voice is hoarse and intense. The multi-layered expression of both vitality and desperation seemingly conveys the paradox of an urgent sense of life in light of approaching death. More than expressing urgency and desperation, the song also carried positive connotations for Åke about Russia and the former eastern bloc where he had travelled, lived and worked. Notably, the mood in the group was vitalised and energetic after this song, observed in cheerful comments such as “very macho!” and “he sounds as if he’s had too much vodka,” thus suggesting that the group attuned more to the vital rhythm and affective energy of the piece, than to the message of the lyrics. Thereby, this is an example of how the same piece of music can afford different experiences in different persons, depending on what the listener attunes to, and whether there are personal, biographical connotations to the piece or not.

Soul brothers

There was a preference in the group for slow pieces which were experienced as peaceful and relaxing, such as Satie’s *Gymnopedie no 1*, Chaplin’s *Smile*, Garner’s *Misty*, Strauss’ *Morgen*, the Beatles’ *Yesterday* and Elgar’s *Chanson de Matin*. The participants reacted to such pieces with sighs and comments such as “how soothing,” “wonderful,” that they were “touched,” often with references to “the soul” or “the heart.” Thereby, they presented more emotional identities than is normally associated with traditional masculinities and the norm not to show emotions. With regards to the level of emotional stress and anxiety that many of them accounted for in the interviews and written forms, it is interesting to note how they appreciated attuning to peaceful and relaxed moods, thereby using the music for affect regulation and potentially fulfilling psychological needs.

However, also in these cases there was an ambivalence in that they seemed to distance themselves from their emotional reactions, either by describing the music as “beautiful” rather than their own emotions or diminishing their reactions by referring to them as “sentimentality.” For instance, after having played *Midnight Sun Never Sets*, Lasse commented that the tune evoked memories but that he did not want to elaborate on them. When the group leader asked why, he disclosed that he so easily became “sentimental,” which he found awkward to be in the group. In his former professional life in the corporate world “sentimentality” was never accepted, but met with an attitude of: “Hey, talk about discounts instead!”

One piece which all experienced as beautiful was *Méditation* from Massenet’s opera *Thaïs* (with violinist Joshua Bell), chosen by Lasse. This piece conveyed a peaceful sense of deep joy and satisfaction in the group, visible in their relaxed faces and audible in their tones of voice and tempo of speech:

David: So beautiful!

Åke: How beautiful! ‘Twas really beautiful.

Arne: What an excellent choice by Lasse.
Group leader: Excellent choice by Lasse...
Åke: Yes, very good indeed.
Lasse: Yeah - unbelievable.
Arne: Medicine, I would say, balm for the soul, this...
Åke: Yes, really. One gets tears in the eyes. No, this was great. I had never heard it.
Arne: This, this music could cure any types of worries.
Åke: Yes, that's absolutely correct.

The musical properties of this piece are characterised by a slow and surging tempo in major key, and a lyrical and tender melody line from a solo violin soaring upwards over the harp and orchestra accompaniment. The mood could be described as "romantic," "longing," "tender" or even "sentimental." Seen from the perspective of men and masculinities, it is interesting that although the participants were reluctant to share their emotional experiences verbally, they allowed themselves to openly experience and express emotionality in connection to this piece.

DISCUSSION

The research question about how the participants formed, performed and transformed their identities can be summarised in two themes: "Ambivalent masculine identities" and "sentient musical identities." From the point of view of performed identities, the examples presented in this article show that the participants expressed ambivalence with regards to "how to be a man," while indirectly performing more emotional identities through slow and "soulful" music, although verbally distancing themselves from their reactions.

Ambivalent masculine identities

Seen from the dramaturgical perspective of Goffman (1959), the participants seemed to have understood the group setting primarily as a formal frontstage situation, where they used the group as an "audience," acting out their frontstage, masculine personae, mainly through jokes and discussions connected to the music, while avoiding the sharing of inner, personal experiences. Joking and focusing on facts, rather than "talking about emotions," has been identified as common ways for men to socialise with other men (Featherstone et al., 2007; Robertson et al., 2016). Addis (2008) suggests that this type of socialising amongst men may be acknowledged as a coping strategy since it focuses on resources rather than problems.

Often, the participants described their reactions to the music, for instance labelling the music as "beautiful" or themselves as "sentimental," which is similar to what was identified by Galasiński (2004) as indirect and distanced ways for men to talk about emotions. Generally, the participants were less interested in discussing memories than expected. This avoidance to share personal memories may be understood as tied to the frontstage performance of the masculine norm not to expose oneself, or as a coping strategy since many of their memories were painful and nothing they wished to revive (DeNora 2000; Hesmondhalgh 2013).

These findings contrast with the often repeated idea that music evokes memories, and that this is inherently good for older people. The participants in the group were mostly not “living in the past” but open to developing their musical tastes and expanding their knowledge. Tunes like The Platters’ *The Great Pretender*, Otis Redding *Stand By Me* and Roy Orbison *Pretty Woman* seemed to be appreciated since they generated an atmosphere of vitality and energy in the “now,” in the group, which was expressed in how the participants rocked and moved and smiled. This is similar to Larsen (2015), where older men described that music from their youth made them reconnect to experiences of youthfulness and vitality in the “now,” rather than serving as nostalgic reminders of old times. Also, as previously noted, a lot of the music that they chose and appreciated was new to them, which they found stimulating and inspiring. Thus, this study suggests a wider understanding of how music can promote wellbeing in old age, supporting continuous personal growth and identity transformation, rather than reinforcing the construction of old age as a period for reminiscence and nostalgia (also noted by Groarke & Hogan, 2016 and Lamont, 2017).

Sometimes, the focus on knowledge had the character of competition and “show off,” which is previously described as prevalent characteristics in interactions between men (Seidler, 2006, 2007). However, sharing one’s knowledge has also been identified as a way for older men to redefine their identity after leaving their professional arenas, acting as mentors, supporting and educating others (Erikson et al., 1986; Levant et al., 2020; Van den Hoonaard, 2010). Thus, the participants’ interest, curiosity and engagement with knowledge about music could be seen as resources that support agency, self-esteem and a positive self-identity, which might be particularly important for men after retirement (Athanasiadis et al., 2017).

The participants frequently referred to the body when describing their musical experiences, either describing embodied memories from dances (Carl), talking about “chills all over” (Åke), or comparing the embodied, empowering experience from for instance the heavy blues by Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, the powerful voice of Vladimir Vysotsky, or the high, climactic tones of opera tenors. Similarly, the heroic stories about the fitness and strength of Mick Jagger and others may have served as empowering identification objects. Also, in the many discussions about dances and the indirect, joking hints to sexuality in connection to listening to Ravel’s *Bolero*, the participants seemed to strengthen their identities as (formerly) sexually active, vital, courting and attractive. Since men often tie their self-identity to their bodies, and the decline of the ageing body can be experienced as a threat to the self-identity of older men (Calasanti & King, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Thompson & Whearty, 2004), having positive experiences in and of the body can contribute to forming and strengthening a positive sense of masculine self-identity.

Sentient musical identities

According to Goffman (1959), the backstage is a place of recovery where people can “drop the front” and relax. While the group did not seem to have been experienced as such a place, the interviews appeared to be more of a relaxed backstage situation. Previous studies have observed that men might be more comfortable to expose personal matters with one person than with a group (Emslie et al., 2006; Van den Hoonaard, 2010), and that building safety in groups with men takes time (Featherstone et al., 2007).

However, through their musical choices, the participants did express more personal, backstage identities, although indirectly, which is similar to how DeNora (2013) describes how music can allow “hidden” backstage positions to come to the fore. This notion is in line with the idea of “performed identity,” and that “we ‘do’ who we are” (Aldridge, 2005, p. 39), exemplified by for instance Simon’s comment in the interview, that he had valued the possibility to express himself emotionally. Importantly, many of these personal, backstage identities were both formed and performed through slow and “beautiful” pieces, thereby seemingly expressing “sentient” positions (in this context referring to emotions as well as embodied and aesthetic experiences of “being alive”), which are not normally associated with traditional masculinity.

Theoretically, the participants can be understood to have formed and transformed their identities in intersubjective affect attunement with the music, both confirming a sense of “me” through music that was well known to them and expanding from what was formerly “me” into a new, transformed sense of “me” through the encounters with music that was new to them. For instance, the encounter with Massenet’s *Méditation* was like that with an unknown stranger, since most of them had never heard the piece before. This is an important observation, because it adds knowledge to the often repeated notion that it is the music that is known to a person that is most likely to afford wellbeing (see, for instance, Lilliestam, 2013). Contrarily, this example supports what Gabriellsson (2008) found, where 46% of strong musical experiences derived from music that was previously unknown to the person.

In the group, affect attunement with the music seems to have occurred in three different ways. First, by presenting music that they had previously attuned to, the participants thereby turned the piece into a personal, emotional expression, as described by Simon. Second, by presenting music that someone dear to them has also appreciated, the music could be understood as an expression of the affect attunement with that other person, as in the case of Lasse and his son. Third, through attuning directly with the affective shapes and dynamic forms of vitality in the music as an “other,” there was an expansion to a new, transformed sense of “me” (Elliott & Silverman, 2017; Stern, 2010; Volgsten, 2012). Of course, there was also a fourth possibility, namely where there was no attunement at all, such as in those instances when a piece of music was disliked.

Critical reflections of the study

Although not uncommon in music therapy research, the double roles as a group leader and researcher (first author) contained several challenges such as role confusion (Titon, 1986). To enhance the credibility of the study and counteract the inevitable bias inherent in these double roles, the first author undertook continuous, critical self-reflexivity and the analysis took form through ongoing discussions with both authors. Tentative conclusions were also discussed with the participants in member checking (Adams, 2016).

Furthermore, to contextualise the situation of being a woman leading a group with men, the first author engaged in self-inquiry regarding gender aspects and expectations. Many of the processes in the group contrasted with the author’s preconceptions and were often surprising and confusing, which generated an experience of being an “outsider” in relation to the group (further elaborated in Lindblad, 2021). Yet, the position as an “outsider” also offered possibilities to see and

reflect upon that which was surprising and different, which added new knowledge and understanding to the topic.

Implications, limitations and future research

This article describes how older men in a music listening group perform their identities mainly in line with traditional masculinity scripts in their verbal frontstage performances, while using music to connect to, experience and express other, more “sentient” backstage aspects of their selves. This has implications for music therapists and other health care professionals and volunteers working with older men, who may consider to:

1. Attend to how norms of masculinity may influence identity performance and help-seeking behaviour amongst older men.
2. Acknowledge older men’s desire to experience and express “sentient” backstage aspects of their selves and attune to self and others affectively in and through music – also when the men themselves do not display these desires verbally.

We suggest that practitioners acknowledge that for some, old age can be a period of continuous growth, development, and identity transformation, rather than merely a time for reminiscence. Older men’s interest, curiosity, and engagement with knowledge about music could be used as resources. Doing so may strengthen competence, agency, self-esteem, and a positive self-identity, which is important for older men who might experience a sense of loss in those areas after leaving their professional arenas.

This study is to be regarded as “basic research” (Wheeler & Murphy, 2016), and was not intended as an intervention study. Thus, the article does not make any evaluative claims regarding the efficacy of a music listening group for the wellbeing of older men. Given the openness with which the participants shared their personal stories in the individual interviews, which contrasted with their hesitance to engage in self-disclosure in the group, more research is needed to design, test, and evaluate how a music listening group for older men may be structured in order to be supportive.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article, we have described how eight older men with life issues around loneliness form, perform and transform aspects of their identities verbally and through collective music listening. While verbally performing mainly from a frontstage position of mostly conventional aspects of masculine identity, the participants exposed more personal, “sentient” backstage aspects of their selves in and through the music they chose and cherished. In doing so, they performed identities that were both in line with and surpassed traditional norms of masculinity.

It is important to note that the participants were not primarily interested in music from their youth but had an open attitude and attuned affectively also to music that was new to them. This observation widens the understanding of how music can support wellbeing in old age, not only through evoking memories and connecting to biographical narratives, but also through affect attunement with the sounding music itself.

This article has presented a knowledge base for music therapists and other health care workers and volunteers to build upon when designing support groups for older men that both acknowledge them in their frontstage performances, while also being attentive of their indirect communications of backstage identities. We suggest that music is a means with which this could be achieved.

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Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

“Φάρμακο για την ψυχή” – Η διαδραμάτιση της ταυτότητας και ο συναισθηματικός συντονισμός ηλικιωμένων ανδρών μέσω της μουσικής ακρόασης

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η ευημερία των ηλικιωμένων ανδρών, παρόλο που δεν έχει μελετηθεί εκτενώς, παραμένει ένα σημαντικό πεδίο έρευνας. Μετά τη συνταξιοδότηση, οι άνδρες μπορεί να χάσουν τις κοινωνικές τους επαφές και την επαγγελματική τους ταυτότητα, κάτι που μπορεί να οδηγήσει σε μοναξιά, κατάθλιψη και αυξημένο κίνδυνο αυτοκτονίας. Αυτά τα προβλήματα επιδεινώνονται λόγω της διστακτικότητας πολλών ανδρών να ζητήσουν βοήθεια. Τα υπάρχοντα συστήματα κοινωνικής υποστήριξης συχνά δεν είναι προσαρμοσμένα στις ανάγκες και στα ενδιαφέροντα των ηλικιωμένων ανδρών. Προηγούμενες μελέτες προτείνουν ότι η μουσική μπορεί να παίξει σημαντικό ρόλο στην κοινωνική και συναισθηματική ευημερία των ηλικιωμένων ανδρών. Επομένως, δημιουργήθηκε μια ομάδα μουσικής ακρόασης για να διερευνηθεί ο τρόπος με τον οποίο η μουσική ακρόαση μπορεί να χρησιμεύσει ως πηγή ευημερίας για τους ηλικιωμένους άνδρες. Οκτώ άνδρες ηλικίας 64-86 ετών συναντήθηκαν για να ακούσουν μουσική της επιλογής τους και να συζητήσουν για αυτήν, με μία εκπαιδευμένη μουσικοθεραπεύτρια (την πρώτη συγγραφέα) ως συντονίστρια της ομάδας. Εστιάζοντας στη διαδραμάτιση των ταυτοτήτων των συμμετεχόντων, πραγματοποιήθηκε επαγωγική θεματική ανάλυση, βασισμένη στη δραματουργική προοπτική του Goffman για το προσκήνιο-παρασκήνιο, στις θεωρίες του Stern για το αίσθημα ζωτικότητας, και στη θεωρία της αρρενωπότητας. Οι συμμετέχοντες διαδραμάτισαν τις ταυτότητές τους κυρίως σε συνάρτηση με παραδοσιακές αρρενωπότητες στις λεκτικές τους αποδόσεις στο προσκήνιο, αποκαλύπτοντας αμφιθυμικές αρρενωπές ταυτότητες, ενώ χρησιμοποιούσαν τη μουσική για να συνδεθούν, για να βιώσουν και για να εκφράσουν άλλες, πιο «αισθανόμενες» ταυτότητες στο παρασκήνιο οι οποίες υπερβαίνουν τα παραδοσιακά πρότυπα. Η μουσική που επιλέχθηκε χαρακτηριζόταν από την περιέργεια και την ανοικτότητα των συμμετεχόντων ως προς το να γνωρίσουν νέα μουσική. Τα αποτελέσματα έχουν εφαρμογές στη μουσικοθεραπεία επισημαίνοντας τις ανάγκες ευημερίας των ηλικιωμένων ανδρών και τις πολλές δυνατότητες αισθητικής και ευημερίας που ενέχει η μουσική για αυτήν τη μέχρι στιγμής ελλιπώς μελετημένη πληθυσμιακή ομάδα.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

ηλικιωμένοι άνδρες, μουσική ακρόαση, μοναξιά, ευημερία, αρρενωπότητες, διαδραματιζόμενες ταυτότητες