



The Application of Classical and Popular Music in Music Therapy

Yiyang Dong

School of Rehabilitation, Kunming Medical University, Kunming 650500, Yunnan, China.

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***Corresponding author:** Yiyang Dong, School of Rehabilitation, Kunming Medical University, Kunming 650500, Yunnan, China.

Abstract

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the characteristics, advantages, and disadvantages of classical and popular music in the context of music therapy. By exploring relevant theoretical frameworks, the study highlights how these musical styles can be effectively utilized to enhance therapeutic outcomes. Through practical case studies, the article demonstrates the distinct impacts of both classical and popular music on patient treatment. It concludes that classical music, with its stable melodies and structured rhythms, is particularly beneficial for improving attention and regulating emotions in patients. On the other hand, popular music, known for its relatability and accessibility, fosters emotional resonance and engagement among individuals. The article emphasizes the importance of tailoring music selections to align with patients' preferences, treatment objectives, and environmental contexts to achieve optimal therapeutic effects. Additionally, it addresses the limitations of current research in the field and suggests future directions for investigating the integration of various music types in music therapy practices, aiming to enhance the effectiveness and applicability of this intervention.

Keywords

Music therapy; classical music; Pop music; treatment effect

1. Introduction

Music therapy, as the name suggests, is an intervention that integrates musical activities into medical treatment. It utilizes the physical, emotional, and aesthetic characteristics of music to promote the mental and physical health of individuals. Historically, the origins of music therapy can be traced back to ancient civilizations, where people recognized the positive impact of music on emotions and physical well-being. With advancements in modern scientific research methods, the effectiveness of music therapy has gained increasing empirical support, leading to its widespread application in treating various mental and physical illnesses, such as anxiety, depression, autism, and dementia.

Music therapy has its unique approaches and benefits. Compared to traditional drug treatments and psychological counseling, music therapy offers a non-invasive, low-risk treatment option that is particularly suitable for patients who do not respond well to conventional therapies. Additionally, the inherent pleasure of music makes the entire therapeutic process more enjoyable, encouraging patients to participate actively and enhancing treatment outcomes.

The aim of this study is to analyze and compare the applications of classical and popular music in music therapy, delving into the distinct musical characteristics of both genres. This research seeks to provide more scientific and rational treatment plans for music therapy patients, ultimately improving its effectiveness and adaptability. Furthermore, the significance of this study lies not only in enhancing the professional standards of music therapy but also in promoting its application across various fields, ultimately benefiting more patients.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Music Therapy

The practice of music therapy is built upon a variety of theoretical foundations. These theories provide scientific explanations for how music influences human behavior and emotions, guiding specific applications in music therapy.

2.1 Theories Related to Music Therapy

- (1) **Psychodynamic Theory:** In music therapy, psychodynamic theory focuses on exploring the deep emotions and conflicts within an individual's inner world. Music serves as a medium to reveal and address subconscious issues, helping individuals achieve emotional release and self-awareness (Yang, 2013).
- (2) **Behaviorism:** This theory primarily examines observable behaviors and the impact of the environment on those behaviors (Yue, 2014). Behavioral music therapy, a branch of music psychotherapy, aims to enhance positive behaviors through musical engagement.
- (3) **Humanistic Theory:** Humanistic theory emphasizes individual self-actualization and growth potential. Guided by this theory, music therapy provides a supportive environment that encourages self-exploration and expression through musical activities.

2.2 Methods of Music Therapy

Several commonly used methods in music therapy practice include:

- (1) **Receptive Music Therapy:** In this approach, patients achieve health goals through the physiological and psychological experiences elicited by listening to music.
- (2) **Re-creative Music Therapy:** This method uses music as a means of interaction and self-expression, aimed at improving the social communication skills of the participants.
- (3) **Improvisational Therapy:** In this form of therapy, patients spontaneously perform instrumental music based on their inner feelings. There is no need for professional musical skills; the focus is on the emotional projection of the music rather than the performance itself.

In music therapy, both classical and popular music have their unique applications. Classical music, known for its structured and harmonious qualities, is often used to help patients alleviate anxiety, enhance focus, and promote relaxation. In contrast, popular music, closely tied to modern life, can quickly resonate with individuals, making it effective for stimulating emotions, increasing engagement, and boosting motivation.

3. Application and Analysis of Two Types of Music in Therapy

3.1 Classical Music

3.1.1 Characteristics of Classical Music

The application of classical music in music therapy is based on its unique musical features. First, it has clear and harmonious melodies. Classical music often features smooth, flowing melodies that provide a pleasant auditory experience, guiding listeners to relax and enter a meditative state. Second, it has balanced harmonies. The harmony in classical music strives for equilibrium and stability, offering listeners a sense of psychological safety. Third, its rhythmic and structural elements are typically regular and well-organized, employing forms like sonata and rondo, which help listeners establish a sense of order. Finally, classical music expresses a wide range of emotions, from joy to sadness and calmness to passion, providing listeners with rich emotional experiences. These elements collectively influence the psychological and physiological responses of listeners, forming a solid foundation for music therapy.

3.1.2 Applications of Classical Music in Music Therapy

- (1) **Alleviating Anxiety and Psychological Stress:** The calming atmosphere and stable rhythms of classical music effectively help patients reduce anxiety and stress. For instance, Mozart's music, known for its symmetry and fluid melodies, is often used in treatments aimed at alleviating stress and anxiety.
- (2) **Enhancing Attention and Memory:** Some studies indicate that listening to classical music can improve attention and memory. For example, Bach's polyphonic music can enhance cognitive functions, making it suitable for cognitive training that requires focus.
- (3) **Regulating Emotions:** The depth and complexity of classical music can guide listeners through profound emotional experiences and reflections, facilitating emotional release and regulation.

- (4) **Synchronizing Physiological Rhythms:** The rhythmic regularity of classical music can help patients synchronize their physiological rhythms, such as heart rate and breathing rate, making it useful in pain management and relaxation training.

3.1.3 Analysis of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Classical Music

Classical music has several advantages: first, its harmonious melodies and stable rhythms help establish a sense of order and safety; second, its depth and complexity provide profound emotional experiences, guiding patients in self-reflection and emotional exploration. Thus, classical music is primarily chosen for treatments focused on attention, cognitive enhancement, and emotion and pain regulation.

However, classical music also has limitations. Its complexity might be too abstract for some patients, making it difficult to elicit immediate emotional resonance or leading to inconsistent therapeutic outcomes. Additionally, certain pieces may have intense emotional qualities, making them suitable only in specific therapeutic contexts. Therefore, music therapists need to select appropriate works based on the individual patient's circumstances and treatment goals.

3.2 Popular Music

3.2.1 Characteristics of Popular Music

The application of popular music in music therapy benefits from its strong resonance with listeners, easily understandable lyrics, and broad audience appeal. Popular music typically has the following characteristics:

- (1) The melodies and lyrics are simple and relatable, allowing for a quick emotional connection with listeners.
- (2) It features strong rhythms with clear and repetitive patterns that are easy to remember and follow.
- (3) The lyrics of popular songs often express emotions directly, making it easier for listeners to resonate emotionally.
- (4) Popular music is closely tied to contemporary culture, reflecting social trends and common concerns.
- (5) The diversity of styles, including rock, hip-hop, and electronic dance music, caters to various audience preferences.

3.2.2 Applications of Popular Music in Music Therapy

- (1) **Emotional Expression and Release:** Similar to classical music, popular music provides a means for emotional expression. However, its lyrics are often more relatable, making it easier for patients to engage in emotional expression and release during therapy.
- (2) **Self-Identity and Sense of Belonging:** Some songs in popular music feature uplifting themes and lyrics that can help patients explore self-identity and enhance their sense of belonging.
- (3) **Stimulating Intrinsic Motivation:** The upbeat melodies and positive messages conveyed in popular music can motivate patients and boost their enthusiasm.
- (4) **Cognitive Function Training:** Lyrics and melodies from some popular songs can be utilized to train patients' language and memory skills.

3.2.3 Analysis of the Advantages and Disadvantages of Popular Music

The advantages of popular music include its accessibility and direct emotional expression, which facilitates emotional connection with patients. Additionally, the cultural relevance of popular music allows patients to see reflections of their own lives in the therapy process. Its variety also enables it to meet the individualized needs of different patients.

However, popular music has its drawbacks. The quality can vary significantly; some low-quality music or inappropriate lyrics may negatively impact therapy. Additionally, certain popular songs may be overly commercialized, lacking depth and thus not suitable for therapeutic use. Some songs may also express overwhelming emotions, potentially overstimulating certain patients. Therefore, careful song selection is crucial to avoid adversely affecting therapeutic outcomes.

3.3 Conclusion

Music is closely intertwined with daily life, making it an effective therapeutic tool. Both classical and popular music have applicable contexts and target audiences in therapy. Music therapists should consider various factors when selecting music: first, understanding the patient's musical preferences and cultural background to choose music likely to elicit positive responses; second, selecting music that aligns with specific therapeutic goals (e.g., classical music for emotional regulation and popular music for social engagement); third, carefully reviewing lyrics and emotional

content to ensure appropriateness for the therapeutic environment; and fourth, considering the current therapeutic setting to enhance the overall effect.

By comprehensively analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of classical and popular music in music therapy, therapists can make more accurate music selections to maximize therapeutic effectiveness and meet the individualized needs of patients.

4. Case Studies in Music Therapy

To gain a deeper understanding of the roles of classical and popular music in music therapy, this section will analyze specific cases that illustrate the practical applications of these two types of music in therapeutic settings.

4.1 Classical Music Therapy Case

In a collaborative effort with the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of Taizhou Fourth People's Hospital, professionals utilized a music playback system to play music for several patients, all aged 65 and older, who were experiencing various critical conditions (Zhai, 2022). One patient, Mr. Zhang, was in a deep coma upon entering the ICU. The following day, piano melodies were introduced, including pieces such as "Für Elise" and Schubert's "Serenade." Instrumental assessments revealed increased brain activity and reduced delta waves after the music intervention. Family members noted that Mr. Zhang enjoyed listening to "Für Elise," and his brain responses were more stable when he heard the music he liked.

Another patient, Mr. Liu, entered the ICU with clear consciousness but displayed significant anxiety and fear. During treatment, the attending physician administered dexmedetomidine to stabilize his emotions and alleviate anxiety symptoms. On the third day in the ICU, calming piano music was played, including Grieg's "Morning Mood" and Bach's "Awake, My Heart" (BWV 645). Following the introduction of music, the dosage and duration of medication decreased significantly, and Mr. Liu's emotional stability improved, gradually reaching a more consistent state.

4.2 Popular Music Therapy Case

In another study, researchers employed popular music to test 23 children under the age of six who were in a coma due to epidemic viral encephalitis (Xu et al., 2005). The music played included children's songs such as "The Only Good Mother in the World" and "Our Country is a Garden," as well as popular internet songs like "The Mouse Loves Rice" and "The Pig Song." The music was played three times a day for one hour each time. Compared to a control group of children with similar symptoms who did not listen to music, the music-listening children exhibited slight head movements, and their heart rates increased by 10-20 beats per minute. In terms of physical activity, spontaneous eye-opening, and uttering vague words like "Mama," these children showed earlier signs of awakening and recovery compared to the 22 children who did not listen to music. This indicates that music therapy has a positive effect on waking comatose patients.

Additionally, other studies have shown that popular music therapy can effectively alleviate psychological stress in college students (Yu, 2014), reduce occupational stress among traffic police (Zou, 2023), and even provide relief for terminal cancer patients (Yan et al., 2023).

These case studies highlight the significant therapeutic benefits of both classical and popular music in various medical contexts, demonstrating their effectiveness in enhancing patient outcomes.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

This paper has explored the specific applications of classical and popular music in music therapy. Through theoretical analysis, practical applications, advantages and disadvantages, and case studies, the following conclusions have been drawn:

- (1) Effectiveness of Music Therapy: The success of music therapy largely depends on the selection of appropriate music types. Both classical and popular music have unique therapeutic effects and suitable contexts. Therefore, healthcare providers should consider patients' personal preferences, cultural backgrounds, and treatment goals when selecting music to ensure optimal therapeutic outcomes.
- (2) Combined Use for Enhanced Outcomes: Whether in rehabilitation, psychological treatment, or stress relief, the combined use of classical and popular music may yield better results, especially when addressing complex emotional and psychological issues.

- (3) **Research Limitations:** Based on the literature reviewed and the author's own internship experiences, there has been a lack of studies comparing the simultaneous use of both types of music across different age groups and conditions. This indicates a potential research gap in the field of music therapy. Future research should continue to explore the mechanisms by which different music types function in therapy and how to effectively integrate them into treatment plans. As the field of music therapy continues to evolve, there will likely be more studies aimed at optimizing music selection processes and combining music therapy with other therapeutic methods to provide more comprehensive treatment options.

In summary, music therapy is an evolving field, and the effectiveness of classical and popular music as therapeutic tools has been validated. Future efforts should focus on further refining the application of music therapy and enhancing therapists' abilities to select and utilize music effectively.

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