Music Therapists’ Preparation for Song Discussion: Meaning-Making With the Music

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ABSTRACT Songs are powerful catalysts and resources for change processes in music psychotherapy. Not surprisingly, music therapists often invite clients to listen to recordings of popular songs. A common song listening method is song discussion, in which a therapist selects a relevant song to explore with a client or group and facilitates the listening and subsequent verbal processing. In the relevant music therapy literature, lyrics assume a primary focus (i.e., lyric analysis), and yet, the music of a song, as integrated with its lyrics, impacts both client’s and therapist’s meaning-making and is therefore crucial to take into account. The purpose of the present investigative essay is to encourage music therapists to give attention to the music of recorded songs as they plan to facilitate song discussion. Herein I present a conceptualization of recorded popular songs and consider how one makes meaning from song listening processes. I urge therapists to prepare for song discussion through careful phenomenological listening and introspective interpretation. Finally, I describe procedures of a developing model for aural song analysis and interpretation based on Bruscia’s Improvisation Assessment Profiles (IAPs) with an abbreviated example viewed through multiple theoretical perspectives.

Keywords: songs, song discussion, meaning, music analysis, interpretation, lyric analysis

Songs are ways that human beings explore emotions. They express who we are and how we feel, they bring us closer to others, they keep us company when we are alone. They articulate our beliefs and values. As the years pass, songs bear witness to our lives. They allow us to relive the past, to examine the present, and to voice our dreams for the future. Songs weave tales of our joys and sorrows, they reveal our innermost secrets, and they express our hopes and disappointments, our fears and triumphs. They are our musical diaries, our life stories. They are the sounds of our personal development. Because of these myriad connections, songs provide easy access to a person’s emotional world and to the thoughts, attitudes, values, and behaviors that emanate from it.

Given the aims of psychotherapy, songs can greatly facilitate the process and provide a very effective vehicle for emotional change. (Bruscia, 1998, pp. 9–10)

Music is a music therapist’s medium of expertise and arena of understanding and influence, and can be highlighted in song listening methods.

Second, the experience of listening to a song involves more than hearing lyrics with musical dressing. Songs are a creative fusion of musical, lyrical, and stylistic features and song listening is a holistic music experience potentially involving a variety of human functional domains—physical, cognitive, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. When a person listens to a recorded song in a focused manner, as in a therapy situation, they are exposed to an amalgam of lyrics, melody, harmonic context, and rhythmic support, along with the song’s stylistic presentation, and all of these aspects impact the experience. Consequently, when a therapist and client examine their song listening process, their experiences of the musical attributes may provide insights that are equally as advantageous to therapy as those stimulated by the lyrics alone. To be transparent, although lyrics take on musical properties when performed (e.g., rhythm, accent, dynamics), the linguistic meanings important in most song listening methods in music therapy differ qualitatively from meanings derived from the music. Thus, I do not consider lyrics to be “musical elements,” in contrast with other authors (Dvorak, 2017; Hanson-Abromeit, 2015).

Third, regardless of the theoretical perspective employed, the music of songs heard by clients is worthy of accounting to listen to recordings of popular songs (Bruscia, 1998; Crowe, 2007; Dvorak, 2017; Eyre & Lee, 2015; Grocke & Wigram, 2007; Jones, 2005; Silverman, 2007). A common song listening method is song discussion, in which a therapist selects a relevant song to explore with a client or client group and facilitates the listening and subsequent verbal processing (Bruscia, 1998; Eyre & Lee, 2015; Gardstrom & Hiller, 2010).

The purpose of the present investigative essay is to encourage music therapists’ attention to the music of recorded songs as they prepare to facilitate song discussion. I believe that the music of a song, as integrated with its lyrics, impacts both client’s and therapist’s meaning-making and is therefore crucial to take into account. Whereas some of the concepts presented here may be relevant to live renditions of songs, the focus of this paper is song discussion with recorded song material.

Three fundamental premises undergird the ideas and opinions presented in this paper. First, in music therapy, music is the primary treatment modality; clients come to music therapy to engage with and benefit from encounters with music (Aigen, 2005). Music is a music therapist’s medium of expertise and arena of understanding and influence, and can be highlighted in song listening methods.

1For a description of other song listening methods, such as song communication, song reminiscence, song regression, and song choices, see Bruscia (2014, pp. 134–139).
for in music therapy. Addressing a song’s musical energies and forces (Aigen, 2005; Zuckerkandl, 1956) can be valuable in comprehending a client’s experience. For example, from a cognitive perspective (e.g., cognitive-behavioral therapy or dialectical behavior therapy), directing a client toward describing their experience of the musical aspects of a song may support understanding of the cognitive and emotional responses the client has while listening (Hanser, 2015). Similarly, a therapist might bring focus to the representational potentials of a song’s musical characteristics in evoking conscious and unconscious psychic materials and related feelings—those that animate psychodynamic processes of projection, identification, transference, and countertransference (Bruscia, 1998; Gardstrom & Hiller, 2010).

Building upon these premises, I assert that clients benefit when music therapists consider the music of a song in preparing for and facilitating song discussion. This idea has received only infrequent attention in the music therapy literature.

Song Listening Methods in Music Therapy

Literature Review and Resulting Curiosities

I conducted a review of articles from prominent English language journals and an international, open access journal using keywords and phrases relevant to receptive song-based methods, including “song,” “songs,” “song analysis,” “song discussion,” “lyric analysis,” and “lyric discussion.” My review revealed that most authors refer to song-based methods as “lyric analysis” or “lyric discussion.” In these methods, clients are engaged in responding to the linguistic or narrative aspects of a song, but rarely to addressing its musical features.

My review also revealed that popular songs are a common category of song from which music therapists draw for psychotherapeutic applications (Freed, 1987; Grocke & Wigram, 2007; Plach, 1996; Standley, 1991). Songs from popular music genres have been employed to address a wide variety of clinical aims (Bruscia, 2014; Eyre & Lee, 2015; Freed, 1987; Grocke & Wigram, 2007; Jones, 2005; Silverman, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2015; Waddelow & Taul, 2016). A few examples of clinical aims include, “evoke affective states and experiences” (Bruscia, 2014, p. 135), promote projections and insight (Grocce & Wigram, 2007; Jones, 2005); “address anger, social isolation, aggression… alcohol and/or drug use” (Waddelow & Taul, 2016, p. 66), motivation for treatment (Silverman, 2015), and “improve mood, identify and work through feelings, process issues, improve social skills in working with others, identify coping skills, and create group cohesion” (Eyre & Lee, 2015, p. 175).3 Curiously, only one of the authors cited above mentions the potentials of the musical features of recorded songs (Dvorak, 2017).

During my review, I began to wonder why music therapists have seemingly chosen to process lyrics to a far greater extent than a song’s musical features. Given the apparent important status afforded lyrics, I wondered whether reciting lyrics for a client to hear or inviting the client to read the lyrics themselves might yield the same therapeutic benefits as listening to the song recording. In the absence of comparative research, my clinical experience—that is, “practice wisdom” (Scott, 1990, p. 564)—leads me to believe that there are indeed fundamental differences between the experience of reading or hearing lyrics recited and hearing them in the context of song listening. I assert that most music therapists would similarly indicate that song listening is a notably different sort of experience. In fact, my belief is that song listening is a truly unique sort of human endeavor due to the reciprocal and symbiotic relationships that occur between a song’s musical and lyrical features and how these together influence a listener’s experience (Moore, 2012).

When an author referenced musical attributes of a song, I wondered how they might account for the music’s import. Dvorak (2017) explored song listening processes with the aim of designing a verbal processing model for “lyric analysis interventions” (p. 2). The author emphasized that, “When examining the therapeutic function of music… typically the text (i.e., lyrics) of the song is considered the most important component of the intervention” (p. 2). The author also stated that the musical attributes influence the song listening experience, noting, “musical elements (e.g., tempo, harmony) may influence client interpretation of the text and modify the overall impact and meaning of the experience for the group” (p. 2). I agree with this thought-provoking suggestion, yet noted the author provided no explanation for how a client’s interpretation of a song’s lyrics might be influenced by its musical features. Nonetheless, Dvorak’s assertion parallels my interest in the potential meanings and clinical benefits to be gained through attending to the musical features of songs. In fact, Dvorak (2017) also urges therapists to carefully consider the “elements of and complexity of the music, as well as possible interpretations of the meaning of the music” (p. 4) when preparing a lyric analysis. Dvorak’s position is an encouraging one for the present article.

Role Relationships Between a Song’s Music and Lyrics

What are the role relationships between a song’s music and lyrics? Are they separate entities that serve distinct expressive purposes (e.g., music evokes emotion, lyrics stimulate cognition)? Or are music and lyrics integrated aspects of a single expression, asserting reciprocal influences as a song unfolds, with a unified impact on a listener’s interpretation? Or are these role relationships fluctuate in a listener’s experience? I propose that the listening experience is an idiosyncratic and situated one, and therefore each of these role relationships have meaning-making potential and are valid.

In my own experience and clinical judgment, song listening often involves emerging, and sometimes a merging of, thoughts, images, feelings, and physical sensations (e.g., movement potentials [Thaut, 2005]), and these provide a unique impetus for meaning-making. According to Moore (2012), a prominent popular music musicologist, the partnering of music and lyrics in songs alters and, in most cases, enhances the potential expressive impact of both. The origin of, or stimulus for, one’s thoughts, images, feelings, and physical sensations when listening may not be traceable to a specific musical or

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2For a list of goals and objectives specifically related to “lyric analysis” in music therapy, see Dvorak (2017).

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lyrical element, but rather to interactions that occur between them. Thus, I find that isolating the impact of lyrics from the reciprocal influence of music, and vice versa, is a limiting perspective. Yet, from an academic standpoint, I will periodically exercise some level of separation between music and lyrics in this article toward bringing certain concepts to light.

Before describing my conceptualization of popular songs, I will speak to my positionality, that is, my position on this topic given the identities that I embody, which influences the ways in which I construct my experience of the world (Kezar & Lester, 2010; Milner, 2007).

Positionality

I am a native English speaker and I do not speak other languages and therefore chosen to delimit my discussion to songs with English lyrics. I have the most experience with English language songs due to the cultural and professional contexts in which I have lived and worked. Although I may construct musical meanings from songs, I cannot begin to presume to fully understand a song that possesses lyric content in a language other than English. Without comprehending the lyrics, the experience of a song lacks the potential for integrated understanding between its music and its lyrics (Griffiths, 2003; Moore, 2012); they are of the same whole. My choice to delimit the discussion is in no way meant to diminish or ignore the value of songs with non-English lyrics, but rather to focus on the song material that I best understand, that has been influential in my own clinical work, and that enables me to explain concepts most clearly. Further, I accept that my understanding of song lyrics and music are influenced by my position as a white, educated male musician living in the United States. That said, my earnest hope is that concepts presented in this paper will be useful to therapists who can and do work psychotherapeutically with popular music with non-English language lyrics, and that others who are qualified to do so will take this work further.

Popular Songs Conceptualized

What is meant by the term popular song? This is a surprisingly complex question, given the enormous range of musical genres and styles available to listeners. Yet it seems that one tends to know a popular song when one hears it, even when the individual has no formal musical training. Musicologist Campbell (2009) noted that popular songs simply sound different in many ways from other types of songs, such as those of the European art or folk song traditions. Campbell explained that “popular music can simply be music that appeals to a mass audience, is intended to have wide appeal, and has a sound and style distinct from classical or folk” (p. 3). Campbell’s point is in part sociological in that the composition process, training of composers, performers, and listeners, performance attributes, audience participation protocols, instrumentation and technology used, and even composers’ intentions when composing popular songs (e.g., to earn money, make a political statement) differentiate them from art songs or traditional folk songs (p. 5).

As musical objects, popular songs are difficult to categorize on the basis of style. According to musicologists, this is because conceptualizations of musical styles persistently evolve in substantial ways (Campbell, 2009; Moore, 2012). Style is defined as “the manner of articulation of musical gestures,” or how musicians choose to perform a song (Moore, 2012, p. 120). This might mean, for example, the choice to record a song in a reggae, heavy metal, or country style. Each style, therefore, calls for enacting/sounding different musical gestures, and has developed through its own historical and cultural evolutionary processes. Style is important to account for in a client’s listening process in that, with recognition of a song’s stylistic features, certain expectations are evoked that affect interpretations and meaning-making (Moore, 2001a). At the same time, there are also no enduring or inviolate rules for how any given style may be reproduced. So as listeners, we tend to rely on approximations of what might be considered ideal models of styles that have been widely heard (Moore, 2012, p. 8). A comprehensive discussion of musical styles and their development is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that musical styles have emerged and continue to evolve through interactions between musicians and cultural resources and are therefore implicated in meanings constructed from popular songs by both therapists and clients.

For the sake of simplicity and clarity, I continue this discussion with my assumption that a recorded popular song, as an object of analysis, has three general parameters: (1) lyrical materials that have meaning within 20th- and 21st-century English-speaking cultures; (2) at least one primary singer/performer whose role is to present the lyrics integrated with melodic and/or rhythmic characteristics (e.g., sung, spoken, whispered, shouted, rapped); and (3) instrumentation that includes some form of rhythm section-like accompaniment; that is, drums, bass, and often a harmony instrument such as guitar or keyboard in either acoustically or electronically produced form. Stated more simply, these three structural features are the lyrics, the melody and/or rhythms that are integrated with the performed lyrics, and harmonic-rhythmic accompaniment, all presented with some level of recognizable stylistic character. Additional instrumental parts are often added to this basic structure and should be accounted for in an analysis as relevant. Moore (2012) notes that, “The defining feature of popular songs lies in the interaction of everyday words and music... but it is how they interact that produces significance in the experience of song” (p. 2). To paraphrase, it is how musical and linguistic features interact—their interrelated nature—that is essential to a listener’s experience of a song and the meanings that they construct.

I agree with Moore’s perception of the nature of songs as a merging of these features. For each is singularly ineffectual as a catalyst for or elicitor of meaning relative to a particular song listening episode. For example, lyrics in the form of words, sentences, and phrases can exist as independent poetry or prose, and one can have a meaningful experience by reading the words of a song. But in a recorded song, lyrics are often aligned with a melody drawn from a particular modality and with distinct rhythmic elements that underscore semantic and syntactical characteristics. In rap, for example, the rhythmic elements and performed vocal inflections are essential to the way the lyrics musically unfold. All told, I believe that a listener...
does not experience lyrics in isolation from a song's musical features.

Melodies may also exist as stand-alone entities that one can audiate (i.e., hear in one's mind), hum, vocalize, or whistle. But without an historical relationship with a melody, such as prior repeated hearings in one context or another, and without the benefit of lyrical dressing or a harmonic context, a melody is limited in its capacity as a source for construing meanings (Stratton & Zalanowski, 1994).

Finally, the foundation provided by a rhythm section (i.e., accompanying drums, bass, chordal instruments), a singular accompanist, or an electronically produced analogy of either may provide interpretive ingredients that suggest certain energies and moods, but richer meanings may surface when a rhythm section supports a vocal line with its intervallic contours, rhythmic accents, and integrated lyrics. Therefore, it seems that the interdependence of these song attributes is essential to a meaningful listening experience.

Analyzing and Interpreting Song Material

Rationales for Analysis and Interpretation

Music therapists are obligated to understand as fully as possible the potential influences of any musical media to which they expose clients, including recorded popular songs. This is both an ethical and clinical concern. Aigen (2009) writes that, “all aspects of melody, harmony, rhythm and meter, and texture that constitute one’s clinical-musical interventions should have an underlying rationale” (p. 242). Hanson-Abromeit (2013) advocates, “Careful consideration of the components of music in relation to client characteristics is critical for efficacious music-based intervention” (p. 25). These authors seem to convey a similar view—that therapists should bring to a therapeutic encounter prior understanding of the potentials of the musical elements before applying them toward a particular outcome. I am in full agreement with these authors; this is especially important in song discussion because the musical elements in a recording cannot be manipulated by a therapist should a client have an abreaction. Clients are, in a sense, vulnerable to a song recording (Gardstrom, 2009). A therapist’s careful preparation regarding the music can help to safeguard the experience and thereby enhance the therapeutic relationship.

I believe that song listening calls for a different sort of clinical preparation than other music therapy methods. Rather than the sorts of objective responses to which Aigen’s and Hanson-Abromeit’s positions seem to suggest, preparation for song discussion should be geared toward interpreted meanings. This is because in psychotherapeutic song listening, the primary response modality is interpretation and meaning-making (Gardstrom & Hiller, 2010). A therapist’s clinical preparation, therefore, should aim toward potential meanings that may come from listening. Such understanding informs how a therapist may position themself to empathize with their client’s meanings. Further, a therapist may better protect the integrity of the therapy process through conscious awareness of countertransference responses that they may have with a song and that could create barriers to empathy and understanding.

Constructing Meaning From Song Listening

A music therapist’s beliefs about the nature of a song listening experience seems critical when considering why they employ this method in the first place. My own position, buoyed by theorizing from popular musicology (e.g., Clarke, 2005; Moore, 2003, 2012), is that listening to a recorded popular song provides unique opportunities for listeners to experience themselves in relation to that song and to construct meanings from that experience. These meanings are infused with each listener’s cultural backgrounds and identities, life contexts, and experiences. For a client in therapy, constructed meanings may also include aspects of their clinical challenges or symptomology.

I take a constructivist view regarding song meanings. From this perspective, individuals uniquely formulate their own meanings from a given listening experience (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Hiller, 2012). I believe that the musical elements heard in a song do not individually or collectively do something predictable to a person; they cannot evoke a predetermined response. Rather, I hold that the musical elements and lyrics presented in a recorded song function together as a unified musical expression across the duration of that song and provide opportunities for a client to: (1) interact with the song; (2) experience musical energies and forces, metaphors, and imagery (Aigen, 2005; Johnson, 1987; Zuckermandl, 1956); and (3) relate these experiences to themself and to thereby exercise agency in ascribing relevant meanings (Abrams, 2012; Ruud, 2010; Viega, 2018). I agree with musicologists Clarke (2005) and Cumming (2000) who stress that music does not function to communicate information directly from one person to another, but that it makes information available to listeners. Multiple listeners may share certain meanings due, perhaps, to similarities in life contexts and experiences and, in therapy, to similar relational or psychological issues or challenges (Moore, 2012, p. 9). It may also be the case that a client and therapist or a group of clients may co-construct meanings through intersubjective, dialogical processes, such as those that may unfold during a group song discussion.

With clear understanding of one’s beliefs about the nature of the song listening process, a therapist may then use their skills to analyze and interpret potential meanings from the song prior to its introduction in therapy.

Therapist Phenomenological Listening

Analysis and interpretation are distinct yet essentially related endeavors and may occur through a therapist’s phenomenological experience of a song and theoretical understandings of the nature of music as a medium of human expression. By phenomenological, I mean a therapist’s study of their own lived experience—in this case, listening to a recorded popular song (Finlay, 2011; Forinash, 1995; Forinash & Gonzalez, 1989; Jackson, 2016). A therapist’s phenomenological listening experience may be characterized as open, uniquely

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5Ideas relative to particular song selection for song discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. For detailed coverage of the topic of song selection, see Gardstrom and Hiller (2010).
Meaning-Making With the Music in Song Discussion

personal, and introspective, with the aim of accounting for thoughts, feelings, images, and physical sensations and what these may mean in that moment.

Defining Analysis and Interpretation

To analyze a song is to gain awareness of salient musical attributes and to examine how those attributes relate to each other and to the lyrics. Analysis, then, positions a therapist to interpret or construct meanings for what they have heard and experienced while listening. The therapist's unique analysis and interpretations can provide insights into how a client or group might experience a particular song and the meanings that they might construct. Of course, a therapist's meanings ought never be imposed upon clients, but they are nonetheless informative for the therapy process.

Evolving Model of Song Analysis and Interpretation

In this section, I describe an evolving model of song analysis and interpretation based on the Improvisation Assessment Profiles (IAPs) of Bruscia (1987, 2001). I briefly introduce each of the relevant profiles and follow with suggested procedures for analysis, which include examining lyrics, performing an aural music analysis through intentional listening episodes accounting for the music as heard (vs. score analysis), and consider interpretative notions with relevant theoretical support.

The Improvisation Assessment Profiles

My approach is based on listening processes described for the IAPs developed by Bruscia (1987). The IAPs were designed “to provide a model of client assessment based upon clinical observation, musical analysis, and psychological interpretation” via a client’s improvised musical products and processes (p. 403). The IAPs represent the most comprehensive means of analyzing and interpreting improvised musical sound in the music therapy literature (Gardstrom, 2007; Hiller, 2011; Keith, 2007; Stige, 2000; Wigram, 2000).

Whereas recorded popular songs are not improvisations, I have nonetheless found through experience that the listening process of the IAPs are advantageous for aurally examining music in non-improvisational contexts. The six IAP profiles are Salience, Integration, Variability, Tension, Congruence, and Autonomy. (Note: The sixth profile, Autonomy, is not relevant in the context of song material). The IAP profiles represent psychological processes that manifest through the ways in which music unfolds through time and provide a cohesive set of lenses for organizing one’s listening. Accordingly, while listening one may note salient or influential/impactful musical elements and events, variability in the music (i.e., constancy or instability), integration or relatedness of certain musical elements with others and with the lyrics, the nature of musical tension(s) and resolutions, and congruence (i.e., coherence or mismatching) regarding aspects of the music and the relationship between parts of the music and between the music and lyrics.

Procedures for Aural Analysis

While analyzing, I seek to account for how I am experiencing the musical phenomena on a cognitive level—that is, I organize and classify my aural foci via the IAP profiles. I am concerned with identifying which music elements are presented, how they are sounded, and their relative relationship with specific lyrics. I propose the following flexible procedures for an analytical listening process:

1. Prepare to write or type notes upon/within a lyric sheet.
2. Carefully read the song lyrics prior to listening to the recording the first time and briefly annotate, circle, or highlight certain lyric phrases or specific words that seem relevant to clinical themes in the client or group’s treatment process.
3. Listen for and identify musical/structural form (e.g., AABA) so that one can return to a particular place in the recording as needed.
4. Listen again, allowing the unfolding music to draw the attention to whichever musical elements and related IAP profiles seem important.

My aural analysis of the song’s music occurs somewhat systematically by keeping the framework of the IAP profiles firmly in mind. I say “somewhat systematically” in that I know that the musical elements will have qualities that I can identify relative to the profiles, but the process is not formulaic; rather it is phenomenological—emergent and reliant on my unique listening experience (Bruscia, 2001). Thus, I listen reflexively given the precise musical materials that present themselves, and I account for how I comprehend their unfolding nature. I try not to obsess over particular music or words, but simply account for their presence as the process continues. The Salience profile helps in this regard, as I allow myself to recognize certain aspects of the music as more or less influential than others, thereby managing the amount of musical information in the analysis. I briefly note these important features, which might, for instance, be the way particular elements relate, vary, or create and resolve tension, as well as any obvious congruities or incongruities between musical events and lyrics. The music draws my focus toward a particular profile or profiles, and I consider the logical relationships that seem to manifest between the musical sounds and energies and the lyrics as they simultaneously progress.

The focus of an analysis can be on any number of musical features. For example, depending on the given recording, my analysis might focus on the nature of a song’s harmonic progression—its flow of tensions and resolutions and how repetitive or cyclical the harmonic movement may or may not be. Focusing on the harmonic motion would be due to my experience of this movement as a salient feature and therefore worth examining. The focus might just as well be on the textures created by the blending of instrument timbres and how these are integrated with each other or not, or on the contours and movements of the melody and nuanced inflections performed by the vocalist as these relate to anticipated stylistic expectations.

Questions of an interpretative nature might emerge during analysis as the musical and lyrical materials are sounded and the song unfolds, but I try to hold these in abeyance until I have

6In this developing model, lyric analysis and interpretation do not occur independently of musical analysis; these features are considered closely interrelated.

7Other examples of improvisation analysis grounded in phenomenology include Arnason (2002) and Ferrara (1984).
a reasonably complete sense of the song’s musical structures and materials. Depending upon the song, the analysis process may take as few as three to five listening episodes but may require more. Proficiency with the processes that I describe hinges on knowledge of how the IAP profiles function as aural analytical lenses. Bruscia (1987, 2001) provides detailed information on the IAPs.

Given the phenomenological nature of the analysis processes, multiple therapists may listen to the same materials yet experience them uniquely, finding particular musical aspects more or less relevant as they listen. Therefore, what I hear as salient, tense, integrated, varied, or congruous may not be what another listener hears. This is as it should be, for each song offers the potential for different analytical foci, and each listener brings uniquely contextualized “ears” to the process. These differences do not make the process untrustworthy, but rather are a reflection of our humanity as distinct, culturally situated individuals.

### Song Interpretation

To interpret a song is to ascribe or construct meanings for what is heard and experienced. As emphasized earlier, each person brings to the process of song listening and interpretation their own inner world of knowledge and accumulated and culturally situated life experiences. However, a music therapist’s interpretations should also be grounded in relevant theory. Moore (2012) noted that “there is no perspectiveless position from which to make an interpretation” of a song, inferring that interpretation always has traces of the listener’s uniquely situated experience (p. 326). For just as with any sound stimulus that one defines as “music,” song listening always involves a level of interpretation. This is also the case because a song listening process is an active and personal one. An individual does not passively receive a song, but rather they do something with what they hear—they interact with the song—and from this interaction some form of overt and covert response is possible and the individual may have an experience. I assert that to experience song material means to be intentional in responding physically, cognitively, emotionally, psychologically, and/or spiritually.

The interpretive process considered here draws upon a therapist’s capacity to experience song material intentionally and to be introspective about that experience. To be introspective means to examine one’s thoughts and feelings that occur while or result from listening. A therapist’s experience of a song, like that of a client’s, is unique and subjective. Yet the range of potential meanings is neither infinite nor arbitrary (Moore, 2012, pp. 243–246). Rather, a therapist’s contextual characteristics and theoretical positioning, along with the precise musical and lyrical materials presented, constrain the range of interpretations. In fact, the unique contextual factors that one brings to the interpretive process lend integrity to each listener’s interpretations.

To explain the ways that interpretations of songs are delimited and therefore not random or arbitrary, I draw again upon the work of musicologist Moore (2012). Moore’s approach to interpreting recorded popular songs was based in part on assumptions from ecological perceptual theory (pp. 243–248). This theory was first adapted by musicologist Eric Clarke (2005) for interpreting meanings relative to popular music and later adapted more specifically by Moore (2001b) for analyzing popular songs. Clarke’s and Moore’s conceptualization of ecological perception holds that certain musical sounds—invariants (stable elements) within a musical texture—provide particular sorts of affordances or interpreted uses (Moore, 2012, p. 12). The action one takes while listening to a song, then, might be to internally make sense of the different sounds relative to each other. It might also be to reflect on how the musical sounds suggest certain thoughts, memories, and associations and their related feelings. Consequently, affordances may touch on a variety of domains available to a listener who uniquely constructs their meanings, but always within an ecologically-bound range of possibilities (DeNora, 2003, 2013; Kreuger, 2014). While considering potential interpretations, a therapist’s conceptualizations are further limited by awareness of the characteristics of the particular client or group for which the song is intended. These may include aspects of their life histories, contexts, and cultures and their psychological challenges and current functioning. Such awareness can inform speculation about how the therapist’s interpretive constructions might subsequently relate, or not, to those of the client or group.

### Abbreviated Example of Song Analysis and Interpretation

Whereas a music therapist’s interpretations begin from legitimate personal and subjective perceptions, they may gain further legitimacy through theoretical undergirding. To illustrate this process, I provide here an abbreviated example of an IAP-informed analysis of X-Ambassador’s recording of Unsteady (Grant, Harris, Feldshuh, Harris, & Levin, 2015) and consider the musical aspects from multiple theoretical perspectives. Again, the phenomenology of listening allows for multiple, equally valid perspectives on any song. As with any listener and any song, my interpretations should not be taken as definitive, but are based on my experience.

As the song begins, four low register, sustained piano chords move in a stable half-note sequence (Profile: Salience). The chords occur on beats 1 and 3 at a slow tempo throughout the entirety of the duple metered song (vi-I-IV-V for the refrain and vi-V-I-V for the two verses). Following the introduction, beats 1 and 3 are emphasized with sustained electric bass notes and the booming timbre of a reverberating kick drum. I experience these sounds as decidedly stable, yet not static (Profile: Variability). The three instruments provide a rhythmic and harmonic foundation that I experience as having a rocking quality, alternating every two beats; that is, I feel cyclical tension and release with every two chords in the sequence, which conjures the metaphoric sense of shifting my balance from left foot to right, as if standing and rocking back and forth. This might align with an embodied cognition perspective (also referred to as schema theory), wherein musical events are metaphorically related to real or potential experiences of bodily motion (Aigen, 2005; Hiller, 2012; Johnson, 1987; Johnson & Larson, 2003).

Embodied cognition also affords meanings as I consider the quality of the singer’s voice. The vocal tone sounds breathy, a repeated upward glottal flip takes him into an “unsteady” falsetto range, and a downward slide in pitch at the end of most phrases leads me to perceive these timbral attributes as
integratedly connected to vocal movements characteristic of crying and sighing.

Then, as I further reflect on these metaphors of rocking, crying, and sighing and interrelate these with the song’s lyrical content, I am able to construct deeper and broader personal meanings that might inform my understanding of a client’s meanings. The vocalist implores his parents to “hold, hold on, hold on to me.” I perceive congruence (Profile: Congruence) between the content of the lyrics, the singer’s emotional presentation, and the undergirding rhythmic and harmonic movement. I could conjecture that the client’s embodied experience of rocking (or of having been rocked by another), and of crying and sighing, also might intersect with the lyrics to afford them expanded meanings, which would derive from their personal biographies, as well as from their ongoing therapy process.

Alternatively, from a psychodynamic theoretical perspective, I interpret the unchanging, cyclical rhythmic and harmonic phenomena as providing a stable and predictable holding environment (Bruscia, 1987) (Profiles: Variability) within which other musical and emotional expressions are made manifest. Layers of arrhythmic hi-hat cymbal and tom-tom-like sounds (Profile: Integration) contrast with the stable and rhythmic foundation. These dis-integrated sonic textures may represent a manifestation of internal emotional conflict. It is within this sonically tense environment (Profile: Tension) that the vocalist tells his story: that is, how it feels as he witnesses the breakdown of his parents’ relationship (e.g., “Mother, I know you’re tired of being alone; Daddy, I know you’re trying to fight when you feel like flying”).

Lyrical content is the essential focus of cognitive-behavioral perspectives in song listening methods (Dvorak, 2017). Interpretive considerations of the music that partners with the semantic and syntactical features of the lyrics (i.e., meanings of words and the ways that one forms verbal statements) may reinforce and inform how I understand my emotional responses to the lyrical messages. In Unsteady, for example, experiencing emotional tension in the melodic contours of the primary vocalist’s pleas (Profile: Tension) reinforces my feelings of aloneness and anguish as I relate my life experience to the lyrics. Yet, hearing the high, consonant vocal harmony layered over the second statement of “hold on, hold on to me” (Profile: Integration) may help diminish the intensity of my feelings so that I can process their rationality, perhaps recognizing that others also share my feelings and that I am therefore not necessarily alone in them. Exploring the rationality of thoughts and feelings that a client experiences from both the lyrical content and the phenomenon of the music’s movements and energies might enhance both therapist’s and client’s perspectives and lead to new understandings.

In summary, a therapist’s aural analysis and interpretations of a song draw upon their phenomenological listening experiences. These occur on various levels, depending upon the musical and lyrical materials presented and the context and intent. A therapist is challenged to be open to experiencing song material physically, cognitively, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually, and to be reflective about their experience. Enacting reflexivity means to apply self-observation and inquiry in striving to bring one’s thoughts, feelings, and conceptualizations about a phenomenon into awareness (Bruscia, 2014, pp. 54–55).

Conclusion

In this investigative essay, I shared my belief that music therapists enhance the benefits of song discussion by introspectively experiencing a song themselves prior to introducing it in therapy. I called attention to the historically predominant focus in the music therapy literature on the lyrical content of songs to the exclusion of musical attributes. I offered an explanation of the musical and lyrical features of songs as interdependent in the listening experience. I suggested that comprehensive understanding of the entirety of a song—the interrelated nature of a song’s musical and lyrical features—may be a defining feature of a music therapist’s work versus that of other mental health clinicians who use songs in their practices. The sorts of recorded popular songs that are a common focus of music psychotherapy were defined and described as amalgams of musical and lyrical components, and I provided ethical and clinical rationales for therapists to pursue deeper understandings of the music of a song prior to its use in song discussion.

Finally, I briefly described concepts supporting one evolving model for song analysis and interpretation for therapists, with an abbreviated sample. Space does not permit a thorough description herein, but in a future article, I hope to provide detailed procedures of IAP-informed analysis and interpretation and offer more comprehensive song examples and explanations. My sincere intent in underscoring the importance of musical attributes in song discussion is to expand the clinical affordances of this commonly employed music psychotherapy method.

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References
