



Canadian
Association of
Music Therapists

Association
canadienne des
musicothérapeutes

Canadian Journal of Music Therapy Revue canadienne de musicothérapie

Review: *Isabelle Raynauld (Director): Tuning the Brain with Music*

Critique: *Isabelle Raynauld (réalisatrice) : De la musique pour le cerveau*

Levasseur, V,

Documentary Review / Critique de documentaire

Journal Information À propos de la revue

Volume 27 | 2021



Editor-in-Chief
Rédactrice en chef
SarahRose Black, PhD, RP, MTA

ISSN: 1199-1054

Frequency /Fréquence :
annual/annuelle

Documentary Review

Tuning the Brain with Music

Isabelle Raynauld [Director]

Bunbury Films, 2019

Human society has been using music in conjunction with health treatments and to support well-being since prehistoric times (Gasenzer et al., 2011). In today's society, however, it is often considered a form of entertainment rather than a tangible means of improving health. In light of growing evidence that music can play a role in patient recovery—in particular, by helping to reduce stress and anxiety (De Witt et al., 2019)—why is it still so underrepresented in current treatments? Could the reason be inadequate communication of results from the latest research into the neuroscience of music?

De la musique pour le cerveau/Tuning the Brain with Music (2019), a bilingual documentary that is highly relevant for its time, reveals the work of music therapists as they treat various populations and of other professionals who make use of music—doctors, community musicians, as well as researchers studying the neuroscience of music and those who teach this discipline. This feature film, intended for both the general public and health-care workers, seeks to answer two questions: “Does music really have the power to heal us? To reconnect us with the world and even cure us?” (Raynauld, 2019). This review begins with a summary of the documentary, followed by an analysis of its strengths and limitations.

The film is structured as a discussion between professionals (music therapists, nurses, a physician, etc.) who provide an overview of the work involving music currently underway in the field, along with neuroscience researchers who explain what happens in the brain when a person plays or listens to music. The story begins in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at the Montreal Children's Hospital. We watch Tanya Lavoie, a Certified Music Therapist, in session with a premature baby. As she sings to little Milo, the sound of her voice accompanied by soft guitar chords has a soothing effect on him, Isabelle Peretz, a professor of neuroscience at Université de Montréal and co-founder of BRAMS (the International Laboratory for Brain, Music and Sound Research), then explains that, in recent studies babies have been shown to possess a musical memory and can remember music they heard at a very young age—even when they were still in the womb. Julien Peyrin, a Certified Music Therapist at Dans la rue, then picks up the narrative. We also watch a drum circle, with some musical improvisations, performed by clients at this organization that helps homeless youth. One of the participants explains how improvisation benefits him, in the form of greater expressiveness, feeling connected to others, and a sense of well-being. The focus then shifts to Concetta Tomaino, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function, who explains that music is able to “stimulate certain brain functions in patients suffering from different neurological ailments” (Raynauld, 2019). She further explains that musical improvisation, for example, can help promote self-consciousness, self-monitoring, and self-inhibition. This is a recurring theme throughout the documentary. We see a veteran who was able to control his symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder by learning to play the guitar, and who then founded Guitars for Vets so he could help his peers in the same situation. We also watch Allison Usher-Jones, a Certified Music Therapist, as she works with young autistic girls at Westmount Music Therapy, and we learn how Harvey N. Alter, who developed aphasia after a stroke, learned to talk again using the Melodic Intonation Therapy program. The final segment deals with a woman in cancer remission. All of these scenes are interspersed with comments from various neuroscience researchers, including David Poeppel and Virginia Penhune.

The film takes on its full meaning through these exchanges between scientists and testimonials emerging from practical experience. We, as music therapists, do not need convincing, since we see how music benefits our clients on a daily basis. Our work is often “behind the scenes”, however, and the general public and health-care professionals are unaware of what we do. Today’s society, in fact, is not always satisfied with the music therapy research conducted, placing more emphasis on optimization of methods and quantifiable results. Society relies more on tangible evidence, which is often developed from quantitative research but barely adapted to the music therapist’s work. Throughout the documentary, researchers studying the neuroscience of music share their discoveries with us and explain that the interaction of music with the brain can support learning, well-being, self-control, and relaxation, among other aspects, and also has the potential to promote recovery in people experiencing certain health problems, such as aphasia, as discussed by Virginia Penhune, professor and neuroscientist at Concordia University.

Another strength of this documentary is its depiction of how practitioners work with music and, at the same time, the diverse means used, based on the various populations and their needs (active and receptive music therapy, learning guitar in a community setting, healing through sound, etc.). Expanding on the differences between the treatment forms presented and the professionals who put them into practice would have been useful, however. The documentary presents various types of music therapy—community (Dans la rue), medical (NICU), or private practice (Westmount Music Therapy)—without describing what makes each one different, specifying the training required to become a music therapist, or explaining the importance of certification in providing quality services. In presenting other forms of interventions—such as sound therapy with Dr. Gaynor and community music sessions run by Guitars for Vets—the film fails to point out that these do not constitute music therapy. A few details on required qualifications and an explanation of the differences between interventions made possible through music would have provided viewers with more specific information.

I also believe that a greater focus on music therapy research, complementing the examples provided, would have been useful. While these studies generally do not focus on how music acts on the brain, they do demonstrate the benefits and limitations of the various music therapy interventions. A presentation of these could have revealed aspects that need to be explored for a better understanding of how—and to what extent—music can act on the brain. Although music therapy research is underrepresented in this film, the segment on the role of music in cancer treatment, administered by Dr. Gaynor, does have a place here. I believe that this practice should be studied further, given the lack of mentored research or a standard protocol using an adequate sample size to measure the actual effects of music therapy in cancer treatment. It would have been interesting to learn if other physicians use this type of treatment and if its effects have been reported on a larger scale.

In conclusion, I believe that this documentary is an excellent introduction to how music benefits the brain. It builds awareness of some of the progress to date in the neuroscience of music, and demonstrates the relevance of pursuing targeted research in this field. While researchers are only beginning to understand the workings of the brain, many of the positive effects of music have already been identified. The acquisition and transfer of this new knowledge could help music therapists refine their techniques as they better understand the brain’s complex mechanisms, while justifying—and even promoting—their involvement in treatments. One can only hope that current and future scientific advances will enable more widespread use of music to promote well-being, since its virtues are often underestimated.

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