



Can music be used in medical education?

I love the idea of medical humanities. I love the idea that the arts tell us something about the complex lives we are fortunate enough to view each day. In the humanities, though, I call more on my passion than on my expertise. I can read, but I'm not a literary critic. When seeing paintings, I miss all those symbolic cues about mortality. I don't understand the phrase 'the vocabulary of film.' I sometimes understand music, though, and wonder what music could offer medical education. Most medical humanities conversations, perhaps influenced by John Cage, are eerily silent on the topic.

There's a little in the literature, so, like Arvo Part's holy minimalism, each note takes on extra significance. Perhaps we're playing music at strategic points in our teaching.^{1,2} Or we may be writing mnemonic songs.³ The only limit is our imagination. So let's all leave our sound-proofed practice rooms, and let our imaginations run riot.

Music can function as a metaphor for medical practice. We can think of the consultation as performance art,⁴ which may just make me more nervous at work. What better description of general practice than a virtuoso struggle to perform near impossible feats against the backdrop of physical limitations to produce something beautiful and moving? Perhaps a guideline is a musical score requiring wise interpretation, good teamwork of separate roles to produce an outcome greater than its parts, and interprofessional arguments over who is really the conductor.

Ultimately, though, music is about listening and emotion, and who hasn't struggled with teaching those? Are there parallels in listening closely to instruments and listening closely to people?

I once asked a group of medical educators to count the number of da-da-da-daas in Beethoven's *5th Symphony* 1st movement to see if we could listen really hard to all the lines. It soon collapsed amid much laughter (and a little annoyance!). Have a go (though your answer will depend on whether they take the repeat or not!). Could isolating listening from the words people say make any difference? Can music similarly isolate emotion from the experience? Music can

provoke emotions in a safe space. It may just be used to set a mood — sad, joyous, reflective. Sometimes something more specific may be required. Pulp's *Common People*, for example, carries a burning anger about being trapped in poverty, which is not captured in talks about the social determinants of health.

There may also be something about listening to a difficult piece of music through to the end, and staying with the discomfort (because you have to) that is a useful skill transferable to the consultation. For some, listening to sections of the *Rite of Spring* may be enough to provoke riotous thoughts. Others may want to move on through Stockhausen, and come out the other side with Philip Glass. You will have other, better ideas. I'm tempted to suggest we start a database of music pieces and how they could be used in teaching. On second thoughts, I'd love to hear from someone who has written a song about it.

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