The effects of music on imagery sequence in the Bonny method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM)

Jennifer Marr, MMus, RMT, RGIMT
Mercy Western Palliative Care, University of Melbourne, Private Practice

Abstract

The Bonny method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) is a form of therapy based on the principles of music psychotherapy. Qualitative research methods were used to determine if the music used in GIM sessions influenced imagery processes and modalities, and to identify any significant music elements. The music program known as "Grieving," was analyzed using the principles of phenomenology. The audiotaped imagery sequences of four research participants were transcribed and tabulated alongside this analysis in exact correlation with each other and the music. It was found that pitch range, melodic shape, rhythm, timbre and form elicited sequences of images, allowing the participants time and space to explore around and within the images and for associated emotions or feelings to surface and be expressed.

The Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) is a therapeutic process where clients experience a dynamic unfolding of images in response to specifically programmed classical music. The therapist is facilitator and guide in this journey through non-ordinary states of consciousness, assisting clients to identify issues needing resolution, to experience strong emotions, and to integrate all of these into everyday life. The main components of this process are the music and the imagery it evokes. A GIM session is up to 2 hours in length and consists of four elements. The preliminary discussion gauges the client's presenting energy levels, mood and important issues, makes connections with the previous session and draws a focus for that particular session's work. The client then reclines on a mat on the floor with eyes closed. The therapist (guide) uses a verbal induction of relaxation or centering, followed by a focus image to prepare the client to receive the music. Then the music, which has been chosen to match the aims of the session, is played. It is during this time that imagery occurs and the guide and client engage in dialogue, exploring and enhancing the effectiveness and depth of the journey. After the music has finished, the client is verbally brought back to a fully conscious state. The post-session integration segment often begins with a non-verbal creative exercise providing a bridge to verbal discussion when the client reflects on the significant aspects of the session.

Bonny (1978, 1994) and others gradually learned that classical music was the most effective genre for the purposes of GIM therapy. Its variety of tone color and form, and harmonic and melodic complexity were able to provide clients with a depth of experience necessary for self exploration. Therefore, the music programmed for use in GIM therapy was carefully chosen for its potential to induce imagery and deepen emotional affect.

When it comes to understanding the nature and structure of music specifically chosen for the purposes of the GIM experience, theoretical or musicological analyses seem to be inadequate. Bonde (1996) asserts the importance of the music's potential for metaphor and psychological imagery being "grounded" in the musical syntax or structure. Summer (1995) argues that, as the client's internal space is in a constant state of flux and growth, it is important to create a musical space in which there is enough, but not too much, nurture that might impede growth, or stimulation, perhaps creating feelings of insecurity causing the client to become resistant to the music's influence (p. 46). She expands on this idea in her article on music transference suggesting that music serves the following functions in a GIM session:

- Holding function: important to start a session with as it serves to embrace the client's internal state.
- **Stimulative function**: to transform consciousness beyond the client’s current state as the music’s elements are rearranged, uncovering possibilities inherent in the original theme, and then returning to the original material.

- **Integrative function**: when the music presents aspects of the first two functions, integrating all of its rearranged elements (Summer, 1998).

**Qualitative Research Methods**

Phenomenology is one qualitative method used in music therapy research allowing human experience to be studied in its natural setting and everyday contexts, reflecting clinical experience and practice. Emphasis is based on research subjects’ descriptions, thus moving away from pure behaviourist methods towards the understanding of conscious experience. Methods function as general guidelines or outlines and investigators are expected to develop plans of study to reflect the nature of the clinical experience suited to the understanding of that particular experiential phenomenon (Aigen, 1995; Bruscia, 1998; Ferrara, 1984; Forinash, 1993; Forinash, 1995; Forinash & Gonzalez, 1989; Marano, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1989; Smeijsters, 1997; Tetzlaff, 1990).

When it comes to applying phenomenology to music therapy research, Smeijsters (1997) believes that it is the emotional content of the music being studied that is important, not necessarily the detail about its elements and structure. Ferrara (1984), like Smeijsters, maintained that standard categories of music analysis limit access to potential dimensions of meaning which might emerge in a work. Ferrara developed the following model as a phenomenological method for music analysis:

1. **Open Listening**: allowing any dimension of meaning to appear.
2. **Syntax**: hearing the music as “pure” sound in the context of other sounds contained within the music itself.
3. **Semantic**: listening for meaning in reference to what is heard with what might be known and experienced already. Putting the piece in the context of syntax and timely experience.
4. **Ontological**: the listener is transported into the world of the composer while, at the same time, remaining within temporal space and time.
5. **Open Listening**: a final synthesis of all these elements including all dimensions of meaning. Two studies following the Ferrara model have been applied to research into GIM therapy. Irgens-Moller (1995) and Kasayka (1991) audio-taped the music and imagery segments of the session, thus immediately fusing the music and verbal material in the same data protocol. Kasayka’s aim was to investigate how musical sequences of the program entitled “Peak Experience” affected transpersonal experience in GIM therapy and found that they were successful in eliciting and supporting transpersonal experiences and served to deepen and extend them. Irgens-Moller (1995) studied the relationship between what she called “helping imagery” (moments in the music when the client discovers a ‘helper’ which can sustain and create change) and musical processes. She found that the music provided the setting for helping images to occur, acted as a catalyst for them to surface, and had a “holding” function in terms of the nurturing experience that these images brought to the client.

A phenomenological study by Grocke (1999) analysed interview protocols of both clients and therapists and identified pivotal moments in GIM therapy defined as (a) emotional experiences which could be recalled in vivid detail, (b) were embodied and (c) impacted on clients’ lives. To analyse the music, Grocke developed the Structural Model of Music Analysis (SMMA) to identify common features in the four selections of music which were playing during these pivotal moments (Groke, 1999, pp. 202-212). Grocke discovered that each selection had a formal structure with repetition, and that they were predominantly slow with consistent tempos. There were also predictable melodic, harmonic and rhythmic elements, and that there was dialogue between solo instruments or groups of instruments.

The research described in this article used a process known as “Event Structure Analysis.”
(Tesch, 1990), to analyse the music and the participants’ imagery as sequential events. This method studies the “dynamic aspects of phenomena, such as the interactions between or among people ...” (p. 64). By assimilating the elements of music and imagery into a single data protocol, the imagery sequences were able to be examined sequentially and simultaneously with the music.

Method

The focus of the research was to determine the music’s influence on the GIM experience in terms of how imagery sequences evolve and transform, rather than to interpret imagery in terms of therapeutic processes. To achieve this, one music program of six separate selections was analysed using the principles of phenomenology. Categories of imagery or experience were examined in the light of the music description to determine the music’s effect on how four participants’ images changed and developed, and how emotions, feelings and physical responses were stimulated. All aspects of the data were examined as a series of synthesized sequential events with the music remaining the constant focus.

After giving informed consent, three participants experienced a series of six individual GIM sessions held fortnightly and one received a single session to provide a gender balance to the data after one participant withdrew. The music and imagery experience was tape-recorded. From a list of 24 available music programs, five were selected for use in the sessions, covering a range of potential therapeutic needs.

In order to study the influence of the music on the imagery process, research methods to (a) analyse the music and, (b) analyse the relationship of the music to the imagery needed to be found. Qualitative research methods were chosen to study the authentic therapeutic environment, where participants were involved in a “real world” event; and to study the meanings that emerged from the research data.

Table 1. The “Grieving” Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Name of Selection</th>
<th>Style</th>
<th>Orchestration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alessandro Marcello</td>
<td>Concerto no. 2 in D minor for oboe, strings and basso continuo – Adagio.</td>
<td>Baroque</td>
<td>Oboe, strings &amp; harpsichord</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodrigo</td>
<td>Concierto de Aranjuez - Adagio</td>
<td>20th century: nationalistic</td>
<td>Guitar and orchestra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grieg</td>
<td>Holberg Suite, Op. 40 – Air.</td>
<td>Romantic</td>
<td>Strings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dvorak</td>
<td>Four Romantic Pieces, Op. 75 - Larghetto</td>
<td>Romantic; nationalistic</td>
<td>Violin &amp; piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. S. Bach - arr. Stokowski</td>
<td>Prelude in Eb minor, BMV 823</td>
<td>Baroque/Romantic</td>
<td>Orchestra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dvorak</td>
<td>Czech Suite, Op. 39 - Romanza</td>
<td>Romantic; nationalistic</td>
<td>Orchestra</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) Transcribing the imagery onto the scores.

The first part of the analysis was to transcribe each participant’s imagery onto the music scores for each of the programs used. The timing of the participant’s spoken imagery was matched with the exact point in the score. For example, several words might occur during one or two beats in a bar, or the participant’s words might be spread out over several bars of music.
2) Selecting the data for analysis.
Because of the length of the programs (30-45 minutes) and that they included four to seven
different selections of music, it soon became evident that the amount of data to be analysed was
too great. One program was selected so that comparisons could be made across the four
participants’ imagery. The Grieving program (Table 1) seemed to offer enough variety of music
style and orchestration along with enough transcribed imagery to provide material to analyse.

Ferrara’s (1984) phenomenological model of music analysis was adapted to follow three
procedural steps:
1. Each piece was heard as a complete work, and points of analysis of the musical elements and
structure were marked onto the score as they happened.
2. Numerous further listenings followed, with each piece broken down into sections, adding more
and more detail to the points of analysis on the score.
3. A descriptive analysis of each work was compiled, incorporating Ferrara’s (1984) concepts of
syntax and semantics (see p. 3).

The data analysis procedure occurred in five stages as follows:
1. Sections in the music were isolated in turn to identify specific music elements. The purpose
of this step was to draw out the “essence” of the music elements and the imagery in order to
analyse the potential ways the music influenced the imagery. The imagery sequences of the
four participants to the same music sections were examined and compared to see what was
occurring at those moments in the music in terms of:
- changes in mode and content of imagery
- emotional shifts
- transference to the music
- changes in levels of consciousness
- physical change
- any consistency between symbolism in the music and in the imagery.

1. The sequential properties of ‘Event Structure Analysis’ (Tesch, 1990) were applied to
discover consistencies in these influences across all participants’ imagery within each section.
The phenomenological music description and each imagery sequence were compared from a
temporal perspective (vertical), while simultaneously analysing them across all participants
from a horizontal perspective.

2. The results were tabled to include significant music passages, their matching imagery
sequences, and comments about their significance.

3. Consistent features of significant influences that were common to several imagery sequences
and music selections were listed in terms of the relevant music elements.

4. Conclusions were drawn as to the influence of the music program entitled ‘Grieving’ on the
imagery sequences of four research participants who engaged in a series of six GIM sessions.

Results

Significant features of the music emerged as having influence on the imagery process (see
Table 2). These were evident in the way key images changed and developed, and emotional affect
was attached to images or evoked by them.
Many musical elements occurred in all or most of the six separate selections that made up the
Grieving Program, giving a sense of continuity of mood and imagery content. These were:
- the use of solo instrumental effects
- slow tempi
- ostinato type rhythms
- minor keys
- embellished melodies, and
- thematic dialogue

Other musical elements were unique to a particular selection, affecting strong changes in imagery content and emotional affect. These were:
- modulations to major tonalities within a selection, and in the last selection
- the use of wide dynamic ranges
- interrupted cadences
- pedal points, and the use of rhythmic changes like triplets, rubato and pauses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Musical Elements</th>
<th>Influence on Imagery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Melodic factors:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- shape</td>
<td>- reflected in line or shape of an image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- embellishments</td>
<td>- created tension and frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- thematic dialogue</td>
<td>- evoked different aspects of an image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- melodic fragmentation</td>
<td>- slowed or stopped imagery reporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key changes:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- major/minor modulations</td>
<td>- changed mood and/or imagery content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instrumentation:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- horns</td>
<td>- evoked &quot;calling&quot; forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- flute</td>
<td>- felt in the head or as &quot;high&quot; imagery (sky)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- oboe and cor anglais</td>
<td>- evoked feeling states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- harp</td>
<td>- created peak or transpersonal experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- guitar</td>
<td>- often felt physically, creating tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- cello</td>
<td>- evoked feminine aspects and nurture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rhythmic factors:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ostinato</td>
<td>- maintained an image to be explored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- pedal point</td>
<td>- slowed imagery reporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- rhythmic changes (triplets, rubato, pause)</td>
<td>- created tension and frustration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wide dynamic range (when used)</strong></td>
<td>- created confusion or peak experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Harmonic factors:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- dissonance</td>
<td>- created tension or slowed imagery process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- interrupted cadences</td>
<td>- created tension and confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- perfect cadences</td>
<td>- resolved tension and conflict in imagery</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Certain consistencies become apparent when this collection of six pieces of music is considered as a total programmatic entity. The most obvious is the limited use of new thematic material within each piece. This aspect allowed the participants to remain present with an image, while other elements of the music evoked emotional affect contained within that image, and the chance to explore it in detail.

A modulation to a new key did not seem to be a significant agent for image changes, except in the transition between major and minor tonalities. These same moments in the music created strong emotional changes either in the way an image was described, or as evident emotional affect expressed by the participants themselves. The major key of the final selection created an emotional shift and assisted in resolution and closure.

The shape of the melodic line was extremely influential in a number of ways. Embellishments ensured that a melody did not move far away from the tonic, creating some moments of harmonic dissonance resulting in feelings of tension or frustration for the participants. The consistent use of descending melodies that increased in volume, and the use of the low pitched instruments, sometimes created moments of confusion, difficult emotional affect and challenging imagery. At other times, depending on the overall timbre of the section, peak or transpersonal experiences were created. This would occur if the texture lightened a little, while maintaining a descending feel in the pitch, with the timbral qualities of higher woodwinds and the harp, particularly during the Bach/Stokowski Prelude.

The use of different solo instruments playing repetitions of the same theme seemed to allow different aspects of an image to be explored. Some instruments seemed to be archetypal at times. For instance, a solo French Horn was like an invitation to move on for one participant, the flute was felt in another participant’s head and the cor anglais and oboe appeared to draw out feeling states with their nasal double reed tones creating a yearning feel. A cello melody evoked feminine aspects and nurture during the Bach/Stokowski piece, the guitar’s percussive timbre was often felt physically, and the harp created peak and transpersonal experiences. The Rodrigo Concerto caused some discomfort during the cadenza with its Spanish Gypsy rhythms played on guitar. This created active imagery and tension which was finally resolved in the recapitulation section when the guitar was absent.

Except for the trombones played softly in the Bach Prelude, brass instruments are not used in the Grieving program, nor any percussion instruments. It would be interesting to study other GIM music programs where these instruments feature to determine their specific effects on imagery, as did Grocke’s (1999) study on pivotal moments in GIM.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is often thought that the music acts as a co-therapist with the guide (Bush, 1995; Skaggs, 1992; Stokes, 1992), implying that the relationship between the two is equal in its influence. It is this author’s assertion that this may not necessarily be so. In analyzing the “Grieving” program and the imagery that accompanied it, there appeared to be a superior influence of the music on the imagery sequences and on the investigator’s interventions. This study’s methodology allowed significant features of the imagery to emerge as a consequence of the music’s influence rather than examining the music in terms of a given imagery theme or modality. Although difficult at first, it appears that it is possible to look directly into a whole music program, as well as into its separate selections, and discover its impact on the client and how imagery is being affected.

The “Grieving” program presented here has some unexpected similar features throughout the program. Other programs with more diversity and complexity need to be examined and compared to discover if there are more generalized musical influences that can be categorized. It
also could be possible to apply these methods to study the effects of other forms of music used in music therapy methodologies such as music for relaxation, song and improvisation.

References


