



*James Harris
uses music as
a catalyst for
wellness.*

The Healing Power of Sound

“Maria” hadn’t spoken for weeks. Depressed and angry, most days she hid under her bed in her college dormitory. Eventually, she was admitted to the Illinois Psychiatric Institute, but she still refused to communicate.

It wasn’t until a friend brought Maria a guitar — an instrument she had always wanted to play — that she began to brighten. Seeing her interest, doctors took Maria to James Harris, M.A., a certified music therapist at the Institute, who helped her learn the guitar as a kind of “nonverbal treatment.” Maria’s behavior began to improve, and she would spend more time practicing her music than hiding under her bed. But she still wouldn’t speak.

One day when Harris was showing Maria a more complicated tune, she suddenly asked him, “Could you show me that again?”

“She talked constantly after that,” says Harris. “Music was the catalyst to begin her recovery.”

This type of treatment is known as music therapy, which Harris defines

as “the use of music or a component of music (such as rhythm) to treat a specific, diagnosed condition.” Harris, who is the music director at Springfield College in Illinois (SCI), has been practicing music therapy for 35 years. He spoke about the healing power of music at the fifth annual Emmet F. Pearson Memorial Medical History Lecture at the School of Medicine.

Harris’ presentation, “Music and Healing: From David’s Harp to Music Therapy 2000,” highlighted uses of music therapy from biblical times through today and revealed music’s mysterious power to heal.

Throughout history, music as a healing modality has been an important part of world cultures. In the Bible, David played a lyre (a 10-string harp) to soothe an enraged King Saul. Harris demonstrated a simple tune on a lyre for the packed auditorium.

“David is the first recorded example of a music therapist,” he notes.

The oldest pictorial example, says Harris, is in pre-historic caves in southern France and southern Spain

dating back to 30,000 B.C. “A character resembling a sorcerer is dancing, holding musical instruments in his hand, performing a healing ritual.”

The trend continues: Ancient Greeks believed the state could be destroyed if people listened to the wrong music; Alexander the Great used music to motivate himself for battle; early American Indians linked the professions of doctor and musician; present-day Tibetan Buddhist monks chant to induce a physiological and emotional change.

Today, a variety of ailments can benefit from music therapy, including insomnia, depression, Alzheimer disease, cerebral palsy, Parkinson’s disease and cancer. Harris also has found music therapy useful for autistic children. “Some children who can’t speak at all may say their first words while singing a song.”

Harris sees music therapists as part of a treatment “team” consisting of physicians, psychiatrists, nurses and social workers, where music is an adjunctive treatment. For example, in



treating some cancer patients, “Doctors use traditional medical treatments like chemotherapy and radiation but will enhance patients’ ability to heal by using sound and vibrations.”

Music therapy doesn’t mean listening to music on the radio, says Harris. It’s using particular sound patterns with the specific intent to treat an ailment. Music also is used in physical rehabilitation; to aid in speech development; to manage physical pain or emotional problems such as death and dying issues; or simply to relax. Sessions are designed for each individual. “Patients often find within one session how much better they feel,” says Harris.

Along with music, the sessions often use guided imagery, a technique in which a person visualizes a desired result. For example, says Harris, patients might imagine their cancer suppressor cells as knights attacking cancer cells. Harris stresses that the technique is not hypnosis, for the person actually is at a heightened state of consciousness. “The connection between the mind and the body for healing is very powerful.”

Though it is unclear exactly how music helps the body, Harris believes music therapy produces a physiological and emotional change in the patient. “When you listen to music you love, your body releases endorphins, which are naturally occurring opiates. So you are actually having a physiological change that is making you feel much better.” Some studies suggest that while listening to music certain naturally-occurring body chemicals increase, strengthening the immune system.

As a complement to traditional medicine, music therapy is being used in medical areas such as childbirth and Lamaze classes, pain management and immune response. In Harris’ experience, physicians largely have been supportive of music therapy. “Almost all doctors have positive

experiences with music, so they know there’s something powerful about it.”

As music therapy increases in popularity, Harris would like to see physicians use it in the recovery room following surgical procedures. Regaining consciousness to favorite melodies would calm patients, who sometimes become panicked, says Harris. “In a life and death operation, music could be that little bit of support that could help patients stay alive.”

Music has been used as therapy for centuries, but music therapy has been an organized profession for only a fraction of that time. In 1950, the National Association for Music Therapy was established. It later became the American Music Therapy Association, whose 5,000 members are in great demand worldwide at hospitals, nursing homes and schools. Extensive education and well-developed music skills are required for music therapists, who also receive training in psychology, sociology, anatomy and physiology.

Learning about unique aspects of medical history like music therapy has become a tradition at the School because of Emmet F. Pearson, M.D., namesake for the School’s medical history museum. For many years, Dr. Pearson, professor emeritus in the internal medicine and medical humanities departments, held informal medical history lectures/picnics at his home. This program became the basis for the annual lectures held at the School of Medicine.

After Dr. Pearson died in 1996, the Department of Medical Humanities adopted Dr. Pearson’s relaxed format and has continued sponsoring the lectures each summer.

Past topics of the lectures described 19th century “doubtful” therapies; images of plague; history of eugenics; and eclectic schools in American medicine. ■