

Student Final Reflection - Assignment from EXPLORE 3IE1 (shared with permission)

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EXPLORE 3IE1: Millennials, Music & the Mind

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EXPLORE 3IE1 – Final Reflection

If there is one thing that I have learned during the span of this course, it is that music, whether through indirect listening or direct performance, can literally play an invaluable role in the treatment and aid of various mental illnesses. This is something I have experienced indirectly, through watching the film “The Soloist”, as well as had the fortunate and very enlightening pleasure of witnessing directly during my outreach experience at the Emmanuel House.

I believe that watching the “The Soloist” was especially effective in tying together my understanding of the course material. During the outreach experience, I found myself constantly connecting back to the film, at times so vividly that it felt as though I was personally living chapters of the film itself. One scene that particularly resonated with my experiences was the one where Nathaniel was playing his cello outside at the community centre while everyone sat around him, listening. For that moment, however brief it may have been, everyone was at peace, including Nathaniel himself. At the Emmanuel House, we were also invited to observe and take part in a music mindfulness session open to the hospice residents, its staff, and their family members. It was executed in a manner quite similar to that of the abovementioned scene, with everyone listening and/or singing along while the music therapists and volunteers performed. Despite its simplicity, I found that there was something very special about that kind of setting –

it was almost as if everyone had become magically connected through the music. When I shared this sentiment with one of the music therapists, she also strongly agreed, and elaborated upon how that very connection is often one of the most significant aspects for the patients: Music allows them to feel personally connected to a community when they might otherwise usually feel alone and isolated. This made me recall the idea of music as a “relational experience” that we discussed in class.

This is but one example of how music was implemented in “The Soloist” and how it affected Nathaniel. As the film progresses, we see further examples of how music has an impact on his life, from acting as a powerful, positive stimulus when he sits among the crowd of a Bach orchestra to acting as a painful trigger for his mental illness when he is made to perform in front of a crowd: For better or for worse, music will always be a part of his life. Similarly to what we discussed in class, we also witness ways in which music aids in reducing the negative symptoms of Nathaniel’s schizophrenia, such as making his eyes light up with passion while doing away with his feelings of apathy.

I learned that as a hospice, Emmanuel House also provides a safe space for homeless people to live in before they pass away, during which they may also access services like the one mentioned above. Being from a more suburban area, I do not often see homeless people on the streets; however, since coming to live in Hamilton, I’ve received much more exposure. Through Steve Lopez’s story as well, these have reminded me of the fact that while music therapy may only provide temporary short-term beneficial effects, that does not make it worthless as a method of treatment. Rather, there are often times that music therapy is only necessary for short periods of time (such as to supplement regular treatment happening simultaneously) during which it can play a huge role in aiding the mental well-being of those it aims to help.

During the one-on-one discussion with Sara Klinck, Sara let us listen to recordings of real music therapy in action that she had with clients of her own, after which she explained to us how some of the strategies she would employ during these sessions related to “entrainment”. It was just as we discussed in class, with entrainment having to do with the human tendency to latch onto particular rhythms. To demonstrate the actual therapeutic effects, volunteering myself as an example, Sara played and sang a song of my preferred genre while making adjustments to it depending on my physical reactions, such as matching the tempo to my rate of breathing, or adding accents when I happened to fidget with my fingers.

If I felt that there is anything I would wish to change about the outreach assignment, it would only be for it to be just a little bit longer in length, or more than a one-time opportunity, as I quite enjoyed it and felt that I learned a lot about the field during my time there. In terms of a different approach, I realize in retrospect that I could have brought an instrument of my own to Emmanuel House in order to actively take part in the music mindfulness session. This would have allowed me to gain technical experience in performing music offhand by spontaneously matching the rhythm of others, rather than relying on sheet music as I am traditionally used to. Although I still participated in it vocally, as an individual observer, there was less I could actively do in terms of my approach as a team member. However, I did try my best to voice out any questions or comments that came to mind, and I found that to be quite effective in broadening my learning in that it allowed me to better engage with the material and with the music therapists, as well as drawing out positive reactions from them. I also feel that in gaining real-world knowledge about the workplace of a qualified music therapist in addition to actually been given the opportunity to interact with one, I’ve been able to push myself outside of my typical boundaries and gain a lot of self-confidence in the process.

Prior to taking this course and going on the community outreach opportunity, I knew very little about music therapy and its real-world applications: I mostly envisioned it as some abstract idea of playing and listening to music to make oneself feel better. However, I now know that this is not at all the case, and music therapy is in fact a very complex subject, taking into account a variety of psychological factors such as the use of entrainment in order to more effectively help patients. Watching “The Soloist” in class also gave me a new perspective on music, increased my empathy and understanding of mental health and homelessness, and taught me that the most important part about helping a friend with mental illness may not necessarily be to actively and forcibly push them to change, but just to be there for them by their side when needed.