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Building bridges between psychoanalysis and music

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Abstract

In this article, I begin by presenting how a Greek song erupted within the flow of my everyday existence and allowed me to reconnect with past trauma, grief and psychic pain. Operating in a register which is different from that of symbolic language, and yet always already within it, music enables productive encounters with trauma and loss in everyday life. I then continue exploring the connections between music and language by employing Kristeva's notions of 'chora' and the 'semiotic', which place the 'musicality' of language, its rhythm and tonality, and pitch and timbre at the centre of the analyst's attention. I finish by referring to the work of Ogden who argues that both poetry/music and certain analytic sessions seem to generate powerful resonances and cacophonies of sound and meaning.

Keywords

chora, music, psychoanalytic therapy, semiotic, symbolic language, trauma

I don't have music, Christ I wish I had music, but all I have is words.

Sarah Kane (1998), *Crave*

So you have learned my secret: All my notes are nothing but blood which drips from my incurable wound.

Mikis Theodorakis, *Letter to Lina* (in Richman, 2014: 171)

A few years ago, I was sitting in my study staring out into the garden, listening to BBC Radio 3 when 'out of the blue' a Greek song made its appearance. The song was called 'Beautiful City' (Όμορφη Πόλη). It was performed both in Greek by Maria Farantouri and in French by Edith Piaf and was initially composed by Mikis Theodorakis for Raymond Rouleau's 1962 movie *Les Amants de Teruel* ('The Lovers of Teruel'). I noticed a tear rolling down my cheek . . . more came down and, before I knew it, I ended up crying uncontrollably.

I was puzzled. Why did I have such a strong reaction to this song? It was certainly not the first time I had listened to this wonderful song representing the power of Romeo and Juliet's doomed but undying love. And it was certainly not the first time I had appreciated its amazing tonal quality, orchestral arrangement and lyrics. It must have been some-'thing' else then.

Lachmann (2012, in Richman, 2014) argues that in order to strike an emotional chord, certain experiences, including listening to music, must meet, surpass, but especially violate expectations. He writes that

. . . violations of these expectations through traumatic childhood experiences, evocative music, or misguided or pleasantly surprising therapeutic interactions can transform positive affect into fear, or can transform fear and anxiety into a positive, calming or even intimate affective experience. (p. 161)

Clearly then the awe and tears I experienced when listening to this Greek song must have been the result of my expectations being violated. Its sudden eruption into the homogeneous scene of British Radio, like a ray of light piercing through the cover of cloud, stirred up all these emotions in me.

But when I focused more intently on this violation, which led to the unexpected eruption of affect and tears, I became aware of its multiple and complex nature. For the last 20 years, I had protected myself against the injuries inflicted on me by my Greek culture and family by gradually distancing myself from them. For a long time, after I had moved to London and started the process of transforming myself, I surrounded myself with the products of English language: newspaper articles, academic papers, novels, poems and, most importantly, therapy – the talking cure. Getting control of the English

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language was getting control of anger and shame regarding my past, and it was hard, hard to turn it around, to take the mess of past traumas and make sense of it. And when I finally felt that I controlled the mess of my past rather than it controlling me, this Greek song came to remind me that I am not in control. Mastering the English language with its unparalleled beauty, order and structure and using it to create a coherent narrative out of 'my Greek mess' functioned as a main line of defence for me. But it also stopped me from getting in touch with my core woundedness and helping me to heal it. In a sense, this Greek song brought me back to myself: 'it was like opening a Christmas present and finding that what was inside was already broken' (Cusk, 2016: 94). I became convinced that it was only in this healed brokenness that the future could take root.

In that moment, I was struck by how little I was in touch with what formed me the most – the affective climate of my early traumatic experiences – and how music reconnected me with this affective atmosphere which was hidden behind the coherence of the narrative representations of my 'English' life. This is exactly what Freud (1920, 1926) had realised when returning to trauma later on in his career: narrative coherence – making sense of one's story by filling in its unconscious gaps and resolving its contradictions – should not be the main therapeutic goal of psychoanalysis. Creating a coherent narrative could function as a defence against experiencing the affective content of one's past and present traumas.

The song also helped me remember another incident that took place years ago, immediately after my grandmother's death. I was standing in the middle of a Pound Shop when I saw a pair of knitting needles that were my grandmother's favourites. I was elated: 'I'll buy these needles for my grandmother', I thought. I was carrying them to the counter to pay, when I suddenly realised that she was no longer alive.

Θεέ μου! (My God!) I screamed . . . and my scream was loud and haunting, like a violin screech sound effect. I walked away, leaving the needles behind. At that moment, I couldn't find the words to express my sorrow. They couldn't convey my inconsolability. They couldn't convey how unreal, how unbelievable it was that the only person in my family who truly loved me, my only real, embodied connection to Greece, was dead. Only music could do this, a scream of the divine name.

One is reminded here of Adorno's (1998) statement:

The language of music is quite different from the language of intentionality. What it has to say is simultaneously revealed and concealed. Its Idea is the divine Name which has been given shape. It is demythologized prayer, rid of efficacious magic. It is the human attempt, doomed as ever, to name the Name, not to communicate meanings. (p. 2)

However, with regard to meaning, if music had none, it would resemble an 'acoustical kaleidoscope' (Adorno, 1998: 3). On the contrary, if music were absolute signification, it would stop being music and resemble language. In other words, music signifies something distinct, but its specific intentions remain hidden. Thus, music lives in the gap between meaning and the lack of it (see Adorno, 1998).

This is the gap that Laurie Anderson (2015) wants to occupy in her album *Heart of a Dog* with a number of tracks that combine the art of story-telling and song-writing. The track that is particularly significant for our purpose is called 'A Story About a Story'. Anderson begins by telling a story about the time when she, aged 12, broke her back and spent several weeks at the hospital in the same trauma unit with children who had been burned and were hanging in rotating machines that would turn them around so their burns could be bathed in cool liquids. She conveys her mistrust of doctors who told her that she would not walk again and her frustration with the volunteers who read her inane stories, she writes, 'like the one with the grey rabbit' [AQ: 2] children stories.

Anderson admits that there is something peculiar about telling this story – something that makes her feel uneasy, something that is missing. And then suddenly towards the end of the track, she remembers the missing part:

It was the way the ward sounded at night. It was the sounds of all the children crying and screaming. It was the sounds that children make when they're dying . . . And then I remembered the rest of it. The heavy smell of medicine. The smell of burnt skin. How afraid I was. And the way some of the beds would be empty in the morning. And the nurses would never talk about what had happened to these kids. They'd just go on making the beds and cleaning up around the ward.

'And so the thing about this story', Anderson concludes, 'was that actually I'd only told the part about myself. And I'd forgotten the rest of it. I'd cleaned it up, just the way the nurses had'. And that's the thing about all stories: the more you are trying to hold on to the point you are making, the more you forget the story every time you tell it.

What is important here is that the intentions of Anderson's story are broken and scattered out of their own force but reassembled in the configuration of her music track. It is by distancing itself from the intentions of a story that Anderson's 'music' track/story finds its fulfilment.

It is this intentionless intention, the 'purposiveness without a purpose' (Kant, 2000), that can also be found in Julia Kristeva's (1984) work [AQ: 3] Her description in the *Revolution in Poetic Language* (and other works) of 'the semiotic' and its relation to 'the symbolic' could be used to sketch out the nature of the relationship between art/music and language. The musical echolalias she observes taking place at the beginning of the child's life, which are characteristic of its existence within a maternal universe (chora), are subsequently both negated and subsumed under the symbolic language of the paternal universe (*The Name-of-the-Father*). One can describe here the relation of the semiotic to the symbolic as one between a perfectly-cut, well-ordered lawn and the daisies – and other small flowers – which, from time to time, emerge

in the midst of it only to be cut again by the violent intervention of the lawn-mower. However, this violence could never completely arrest the growth of these flowers, and if it does, then the symbolic 'lawn' would be deprived of the vitality and beauty of the semiotic 'daisies'. In other words, if language does not contain within it a certain 'musicality' – its timbre, pitch and rhythm – and if it is transformed into pure 'literality', then it becomes rigid, instrumental and 'lifeless'. And, if the musicality of the semiotic is not contained within the structure and order of the symbolic, then it becomes a mere succession of anarchic sensuous stimuli.

This dialectical relationship between the semiotic and the symbolic, music and language is absolutely crucial for psychoanalytic practice. If the two domains are inextricably, dialectically linked, then it does not make sense to conceive of psychoanalysis as only an interpretative practice, which seeks to unearth meaning from the depths of the patient's unconsciousness. In other words, the goal of analysis is for the analyst not only to 'under'-stand but also to 'by'-stand and 'with'-stand his or her patient. Or as Ogden (1999) states,

. . . [the analyst] is not primarily engaged in an effort to unearth what lies 'behind' . . . or 'beneath' the patient's report of a dream or of a life event. Instead (or perhaps more accurately, in addition), he attempts to listen to the sound and feel of 'what's going on', to the 'music of what happens'. (p. 979)

It seems to me that both music and psychoanalysis attempt to include the full gamut of human experience from the most horrific and intolerable to our most gentle and affectionate ones. The intonations of loss and yearning existing in the Greek song at the beginning of this article and the feelings of rage, shame, desire and love I experienced in my analytic sessions (both as a patient and therapist) represent attempts to create situations in which I could remain attuned and alive to the intricate texture and difficulty of my experience, in spite of my, at times, unavoidable wish to dissociate from and, ultimately, kill the pain of it. As Ogden (1999) puts it,

Perhaps, the almost irresistible impulse to kill the pain, and in so doing kill a part of ourselves, is what is most human about us. We turn to poetry [music] and to psychoanalysis in part with the hope that we might reclaim (or perhaps experience for the first time) forms of human aliveness that we have foreclosed to ourselves. (p. 992)

To conclude, the greatest lesson that both music and psychoanalysis offer us is the possibility to embrace the paradox that the acceptance of aspects of ourselves that are particularly painful and traumatic is paramount to the process of becoming fully alive.

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