

The loss of music and loss of words!

Covid 19 Pandemic – The virus which reeked havoc and decimated Music, more so Music Education, in South Africa, leaving us at a loss for words.

“A recent study compiled by a team of social neuroscientists from Bar-Ilan University and the University of Chicago introduced a model of the brain that sheds light on the social functions and brain mechanisms that underlie the musical adaptations used for human connection. This model is unique because it focuses on what happens in the brain when people make music together, rather than when they listen to music individually.”

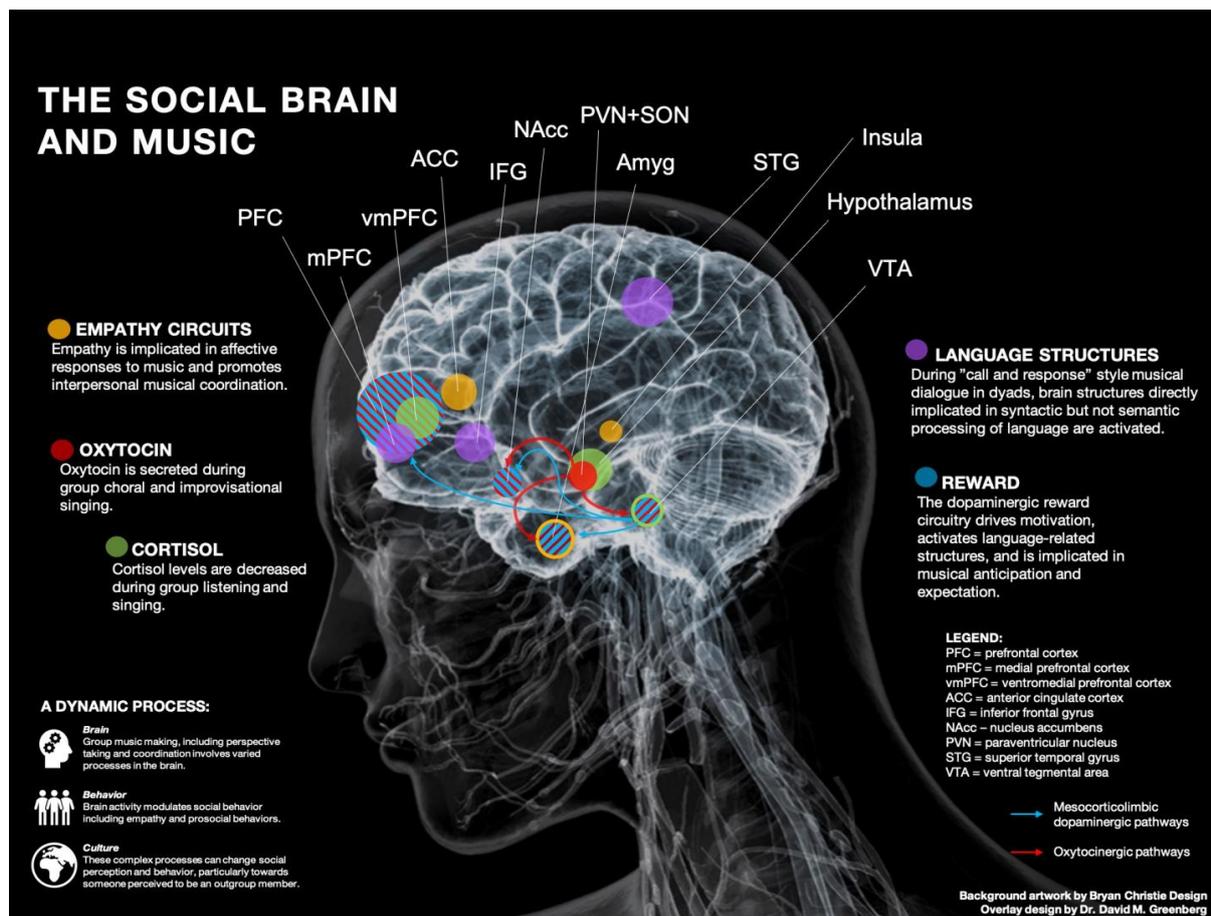
With the recent pandemic we all experienced a “sense of silence”. Concerts and productions were cancelled, and many venues and theatres had to close their doors because of the lack of income created by the lock-down regulations due to the Covid pandemic.

Many artists took their talents to their balconies or parks, ~ this included people singing together on a “zoom call” and streaming concerts from their living rooms amongst other methods used by artists during this period.

The research as mentioned above, was encouraged by the artists/creative milieu around the world to advance the continuation of music, together with colleagues and friends while keeping social distancing in mind during the pandemic.

“The team fused the latest advances in social neuroscience and the field of music, including evolutionary theory. They synthesised these advances and highlighted five key functions and mechanisms of the brain that contribute to social connection through music.

These are (1) empathy circuits, (2) oxytocin secretion, (3) reward and motivation, including dopamine release, (4) language structures, and (5) cortisol. These five functions and mechanisms involve at least 12 important brain regions and two pathways which are mapped below:”



Empathy grants us some insight into other people’s feelings, their thoughts, and views on matters. This can be enhanced through interactive musical co-ordination between people.

Oxytocin, is more commonly known as the "love hormone", reason being that this is the major contributor to our sense of feeling a bond with other people. It is found to be ‘produced’ when people sing together (rehearsed or improvised).

Dopamine is a neurotransmitter. It produces a sense of pleasure and is released during musical probability. It is critical for the sense of rewards and motivation.

We often refer to the "call" and "answer" of musical conversations in music works. These are the language structures in the brain, and they are engaged in back-and-forth musical dialogue.

Cortisol which we call the “stress hormone”. It does contribute to stress levels, but it is reduced in the brain when people sing together. In group activities it can also lower stress levels when they listen to music together.

This research done provides us the foundation of an emerging field in music/brain studies called the "social neuroscience of music".

This can be built on research done previously regarding the already established cognitive neuroscience of music studies, which were largely focussed on the listening of music.

A better understanding of the social neuroscience of music can piece together an important role for the assistance in the improvement of social bonding around the world, especially in nations that are at war or experiencing conflict.

This is confirmed by a study compiled by Ms. Verena Heidenreich in 2004, where music therapy was brought into use in war effected areas. The findings were astonishing and shows that there was a significant decrease in the symptoms of trauma when using music therapy.

The negative feelings experienced by children in Sierra Leone and Rwanda changed remarkably after a period of trauma healing with recreational and emotional/expressive and communicative activities such as music, arts, writing and storytelling were dealt with the children.

Music and improvisation with the use of music, provides an alternative form of communication in these situations, where children find it hard to express their feelings and emotions after experiencing trauma.

The relationship/communication in a counselling/therapy session can be experienced as less threatening to a child via this method, rather via a direct verbal interaction, as we know it.

Thus, the “participants” in music therapy treatments can explore, ‘mimic’ their behaviours felt, their actions and reactions experienced, within a safe and protected environment created by the therapists.

The methods used within these sessions are mainly improvisational music therapy using simple instruments (for example percussion) and sometimes local/traditional instruments, depending on the country in question. Singing and dancing are also being used extensively and can provide insight for the therapist to their recent trauma suffered.

This was successfully presented in at least fifteen countries already, to name but a few: Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Chechnya, Congo, Eritrea, Georgia, Palestine, Romania, India, Kosovo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone and Tanzania.

Instead of music and arts been seen as purely “entertainment”, music, arts and music therapy must / should be utilised:

- as a powerful tool that can bring people together,
- to promote compassion, understanding and a communication method used to heal social disagreements.
- to form a core feature and function of the human existence, with important social and mental implications.

Based on the above research done, it is in my opinion that music can be clearly distinguished as a vital component of the human hierarchy of needs: – which can be placed in the sections of:

- **safety needs:** where a person's health is categorised.
- **love and belonging:** where a person's connections and relationships are categorised.
- **esteem:** where a person's self-esteem is categorised.
- **self – actualisation:** where a person's self-worth and standards are categorised.

Because music assists with health/mental health, partnerships/friendships and assists in creating well balanced people, often after experiencing trauma and shock, it is my belief that Music, Music Education and Music Therapy should play a much greater roll in our modern day.

The arts are integral to the societal, civic, and financial well-being and vitality of a nation. Arts participation in childhood and youth has been linked to positive academic-, social-, and emotional outcomes later in life. There are also positive relationships between art-going and other social and civic activities, such as volunteering in their communities of a country, for example teaching at the schools located in the more outlined areas.

This pandemic has destroyed many aspects of and in our daily lives, and it appears as if will continue to destroy life as we know it even further. With the pandemic many people faced death and disruption in various forms, such as their relationships, work, emotionally as well as mentally.

As a teacher, music therapist and performing artist, I am at loss of words because, arts is not what we teach but what we do and live for - I know the amount of work, time and effort that is required to keep the arts alive, under “normal” conditions, not to mention, when we are experiencing a worldwide disaster.

Arts and culture across the globe have experienced substantial economic setbacks because of COVID-19. There appears to be no or at best a very limited political will to address the issue.

Across the field, whether it is artistic limitations where no rehearsals took place, restrictions on gatherings and severe unemployment, it has taken a devastating and excessive toll on the arts/music sector, around the globe.

The full scope of ruination and the scale of the impact can be difficult to determine, because many artists have adapted and found new ways to ‘continue’ with their plans. However, the actual figures and impact will only be tangible in the coming years (in my opinion between one to four years, or even more, depending on the country, the political will and their plan of action going forward) and in some countries it may never “recover” to standard that it was before Covid.

With reference to my teaching and my own experience with Covid and with students, this is my conclusion on the importance of knowing the warning signs of depression, anxiety and mental health illnesses for parents and young adults. How music and music therapy assisted those affected during this period:

- **Self-neglect:**

Early signs can include amongst others:

Appetite changes – following a healthy diet is important because this serves to regulate adequate energy to maintain the body’s metabolic needs accordingly. Related symptoms and signs are missing meals, meal replacement drinks, energy drinks, weight loss and depression. If not addressed, this could lead to Anorexia or Bulimia etcetera.

Self-harm – this can be practised in many ways, but the most common is cutting the skin with sharp objects and/or burning themselves and/or overdosing on drugs or medication such as sleeping pills.

Suicide - the sad reality we are facing currently is that pupils as young as nine years old are committing suicide in South Africa.

Warning signs can include:

- A. A change in sleeping habits.
- B. Withdrawal from friends and family.
- C. Experience trouble at school and achieving lower marks. Bullying at school.
- D. Writing final notes/leaving letters to people.

***Music lessons/Music Therapy related:** There is a link between Country music and depression associated with suicide.*

Active music therapy can be similar to the following:

- *Write your own “country music song” which will have positive attributes relating to depression/suicide attempts. This will enhance the feeling of accomplishment, creating new ideas and concepts and will provide a sense of closure.*
- When training/exercising for example, listening to music with a steady tempo, encourages participation.

· **Depression:**

Depression symptoms can vary from mild to severe. It includes some of these mentioned below:

- o Feeling sad/having a depressed mood majority of the time.
- o Loss of interest in life and activities or find no pleasure in activities once enjoyed.
- o Feeling worthless or guilty about something not important.

As with mental matters some aspects do overlap:

- o Loss of energy. Fatigue.
- o Changes in appetite.
- o Thoughts of death or suicide.
- o Disrupted sleeping patterns. (Insomnia)

***Music lessons/Music Therapy related:** Rock music can help to boost energy levels.*

Active music therapy can be similar to the following:

In the special case where there are multiple group participants, of the same age, background etc. A group activity can be to learn a new song. With this activity the members will learn to make use of music in order to communicate their feelings and will thus be meaningful to express their feelings and participate via an interactive manner. Often these sessions will encourage participation which would not normally occur during a standard therapy session.

· **Anxiety:**

- o The feeling of nervousness or anxiousness and involves excessive fear or unease.

This is often triggered by an emotional response to an immediate threat, feeling or situation where the person sense unsureness.

***Music lessons/Music Therapy related:** Blues music slows down the rate and has a calming effect.*

Active music therapy can be similar to the following:

Listening to a piece of music which is of a different genre than the usual, will expand the horizons and create a sense of “new”.

· **Mental illness:**

- o *Mood changes* — Rapid or dramatic shifts in emotions, as well as depressed feelings.
- o *Drop in functioning* — An unusual drop in functioning, at school, work or social activities. Examples can be quitting sport, failing in school/university or difficulty performing familiar tasks. Failure to follow instructions.
- o *Increased sensitivity* — Heightened sensitivity to sights, sounds, smells or touch, avoidance of over-stimulating situations.
- o *Unusual behaviour* – Odd, uncharacteristic, peculiar behaviour, which you would not associate with yourself/partner.

As with mental matters some aspects do overlap, as mentioned previously:

- o Sleep and appetite changes
- o Nervousness
- o Withdrawal

***Music lessons/Music Therapy related:** Reggae music slows down the heart rate to its resting state.*

Active music therapy can be similar to the following:

A therapy session can be to have for example: “Red Red Wine” playing where you add guitar chords with it. This helps to switch off the brain to get into “relax mode”, participate and not being under any pressure to play correctly/in time with the backtrack.

It is important to place emphasis on the following: One or two of these symptoms alone cannot predict a mental illness but may indicate the need for further investigation and evaluation. A visit to the doctor is normally the first action to be taken and thereafter he/she shall revert further steps and/or a referral to other doctors such as a psychologist and/or play therapist and/or a music therapist, etcetera.

The above “warning signs” are provided as a reference only. They are my examples of experienced situations and my experiences throughout the years of teaching and recent therapy sessions during the Covid pandemic.

This should not be used as a means of diagnosis, nor is it my intention, to help people self-diagnose. *Should you suspect that you, a family member, relative or friend requires assistance, please visit your doctor for diagnosis and to receive the professional help that may be require.*

In my final conclusion, it has been ascertained that the mental health crisis affecting young people is indicative of a systematic failure, which will continue for generations to come. This should not be acceptable to anyone.

Because arts/music education has been / is “absent” in South Africa for many years already, generations of young people have a massive cavity in this regard and this can be seen in the emotional and mental well-being of the younger South Africans, currently now even more prominent during Covid and the uncertainly and turmoil created by the pandemic with the anarchy that prevailed with the recent unrest and social discord.

Arts, music, music education, music therapy, choir participation, singing, drama productions, etcetera should be part of everyday life, because of the positive outcomes the arts have on a person’s general well-being, mental health, and brain development.

Sadly, this became less and less of a feature in education and life as a whole though the years gone by in South Africa, and the effects of these actions and decisions, or rather lack of, are now evident in the younger generation/s.

Arts in any form, provides assistance in mental health which supports people in coping with difficult times and research substantiates this, over and over.

Although being a vital part of a person’s health (emotionally and mentally), this was forcefully removed from, people worldwide, during the Covid pandemic - thus the mental health disaster the world is currently facing. One only needs to look at the suicide rates, not to mention the self-harm, alcohol and rampant drug abuse that is currently prevailing.

I sincerely wish all well and may your hearts and minds be filled with love, compassion, and the most beautiful music.

Music is Medicine for the mind. Music c’est la vie!