

Exploring Meaningful Experiences of Group Music and Imagery Sessions: An Intrinsic Case Study

PETRA JERLING

North-West University | Musical Arts in South Africa, Resources and Applications (MASARA) | South Africa*

LIESL VAN DER MERWE

North-West University | Musical Arts in South Africa, Resources and Applications (MASARA) | South Africa

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this intrinsic case study was to explore the meaning that participants ascribed to their lived experiences while participating in group Music and Imagery (MI) sessions. MI, a strength-building receptive music therapy method, involves listening to music whilst drawing and can be utilised for individuals and groups. Five South African music teachers took part in a study exploring their meaning-making of MI sessions after they had been infected with the COVID-19 virus. Each participant had four individual sessions, and the group had three sessions together during 2022. This case study focuses on the three online group sessions. A focus group was held with all group members after the three group sessions, and the data collected from the focus group, as well as the group feedback discussions after each session were transcribed, analysed and coded. The themes that arose included character strengths, trust, universality and the need to connect. Findings indicate that MI sessions can enhance personal well-being and experiences of meaning-making.

KEYWORDS

Music and Imagery (MI); group music therapy; online sessions; case study

*musikterapie@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Currently, an abundance of research is devoted to exploring human well-being, especially in light of the pandemic. The well-being of all people has been negatively impacted by COVID-19 (Sollis *et al.*, 2021), particularly those who were infected (Alharbi *et al.*, 2022). According to an analysis of mental health and well-being during the pandemic in the United Kingdom (Wetherall *et al.*, 2022), the well-being and mental health of the general population deteriorated. Naidu (2020) argued that the pandemic would have a negative impact on the already challenging social and economic situation in South Africa, and also included risks to mental health and well-being. A study conducted by five music therapy students, of which three are South African, one Scottish and one from New Zealand (Nuse *et al.*, 2022) looked at the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the future of music therapists, and the themes that were identified included isolation, anxiety and even loss. The effect on teachers when schools were closed and online teaching was explored cannot be underestimated. One South African study explored virtual (online) musical performance as a way to “retain (my) visibility in the community” (Erasmus-Alt, 2021, p.272). This was a real and pressing question for many music teachers during the pandemic, especially those teachers in South Africa, who teach instrumental music to individual students in their private capacity. These teachers are not employed by a school, and their income from teaching privately hang in the balance due to the lockdown during the pandemic.

Teachers’ well-being was the subject of several studies during and after the pandemic. A South African study included 11 musicians involved in higher education concluded that music was helpful with coping during the COVID-19 pandemic (Van der Merwe *et al.*, 2021). In this study, the authors concluded that musicking, in whichever way possible during the pandemic, was helpful in finding hope and strategies for coping. Participants’ well-being was improved through connecting with each other and with music. In the United Kingdom, a survey was done, including 2698 teachers, regarding COVID-19 preventative measures in schools and staff well-being (Sundaram *et al.*, 2023). Although this study focused on physical well-being, the emotional fatigue of teachers was also noted. Younger children and teachers were negatively influenced as well, as teachers reported that they did not achieve their teaching goals (Alsabeelah, 2021). Furthermore, teachers experienced feelings of disconnectedness and being overwhelmed (Frey-Clark *et al.*, 2023).

Teachers’ psychological distress was the subject of a study by Kong and Wong (2022) in which they explored the use of music listening for better coping. They found that well-being and distress could be moderated by music listening. The positive role that music can fulfil in terms of well-being was also noticed by Jerling and Heyns (2020) and Granot *et al.* (2021). Both studies concluded that music helped with connection, coping, enjoyment, and hope-giving, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and other difficult circumstances. Even prior to the pandemic, music —and more specifically the literature on music therapy as an enhancer of well-being— was reviewed by Solli *et al.* (2013), McKinney and Honig (2017), and Jerling and Heyns (2020). Group music therapy enhances a sense of being together, ‘being someone’, and clients ‘having a good time’, according to Solli *et al.* (2013). McKinney and Honig’s (2017) review reported improved quality of life, and the review by Jerling and Heyns (2020) also reported enhanced quality of life as well

as increased resilience of clients in various settings where receptive music therapy was employed in groups.

Receptive music therapy can be defined as a therapy method which entails listening to existing, pre-composed music for therapeutic benefits. Other music therapy methods include active music-making and improvisation (Wigram *et al.*, 2002). There are various receptive music therapy methods, of which the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (BMGIM) has been one of the most prominent since the 1970s, with many adaptations (Bruscia, 2015; Grocke & Moe, 2015; Merrit, 1996). Lisa Summer was a student of Helen Bonny's, and she developed the Continuum Model of Guided Imagery and Music (CMGIM), which consists of two methods, namely BMGIM and Music and Imagery (MI) (Summer, 2015).

BMGIM uses a pre-programmed set of mostly Western, classical-style pieces of music to guide the listening client through a visual or imagined journey with closed eyes whilst deeply relaxed (Bonny, 2010). The Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music is a psychotherapeutic method, and the music programme is carefully selected to allow visualisation (or imaging) while the client has been prepared through an induction to relax into an altered state of consciousness (Bonny, 2010). It is thus a prerequisite that the client must be open-minded and have sufficient ego strength (Bruscia, 2015). However, in MI, one piece of music is chosen collaboratively between the client and the therapist. Then, drawing takes place whilst the music is being listened to (Summer, 2015). The MI method ranges on a continuum from a supportive level, followed by the re-educative level, and lastly, a reconstructive level (Montgomery, 2012; Summer, 2015). The supportive level of MI is also called resource-oriented MI (Story & Beck, 2017), as it focuses on identifying and building the resources that are already present in the client. The purpose of the other levels is to gain new perspectives and find ways to put these resources into practice in daily life (Summer, 2015).

MI starts with identifying existing personal resources, which implies this method of therapy seems to be relatable to the principles of positive psychology that have to do with nurturing strong character traits. Music therapy, similar to positive psychology, focuses on the strengths of the client which then become their resources for change (Wigram, Pederson, & Bonde, 2002). Change implies personal growth and rectifying dysfunctional behaviours (Cummins, Sevel, & Pedrick, 2012). Bruscia (2014) also claims that music therapy, because it is a systematic therapy, motivates the client to stay engaged, giving them time to build their own resources. Positive psychology scientifically studies human optimal functioning and flourishing. These studies focus on individuals, or a group or even organisations (Gable & Haidt, 2005). Sheldon and King (2001) emphasised that people's strengths and virtues are studied with the purpose of enabling the individual, group, or organisation to thrive. Peterson (2008) simply defines positive psychology as the study of "what makes life worth living". Positive psychology has at its core a focus on what is 'right' or healthy. It includes studying virtues and strengths, and then building on these instead of just focusing on pathology. In applying this approach, one can start looking at 'what is wrong' by using what is strong (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Research has shown that doing receptive music therapy in groups can be very helpful to clients in various settings (Summer, 2019). Examples in the literature include group receptive music therapy since the 1990s. Group work has been done with physically disabled clients (Short, 1992), clients struggling with PTSD (Blake & Bishop, 1994), patients with acute psychiatric conditions (Goldberg, 1994; Moe, 2002) and people with eating disorders (Justice, 1994).

The impact of the pandemic on the well-being of musicians was explored by Whitley *et al.* (2022), and the findings revealed that it was very important for a musician's well-being to be sustained. In a survey done in the USA, music therapists reported that, during the pandemic, their services changed to telehealth, online music lessons, and even pre-recorded video sessions (Gaddy *et al.*, 2020). Correspondents also indicated that they had hope for the music therapy profession. Yet, no specific music therapy method has been investigated, and there is a gap in the research regarding whether or how music teachers were helped through receptive music therapy at the time of the pandemic. The researchers thus wanted to explore how music therapy could improve the well-being of music teachers. Furthermore, the present study is unique since it focuses on music teachers who were all infected with the virus. We wanted to know if music teachers would react differently to music therapy than clients with no academic knowledge of music. The study uses MI as a method, with the additional circumstance of doing the group work online, which was an unexplored territory.

METHOD

An intrinsic case study is a study where the case itself is the focus. It includes describing the case in detail, and taking the context into account is very important (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This means that a specific phenomenon is explored within a specific real-life situation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In this study, the phenomenon of group MI sessions was explored by five music teachers, who had all been infected with the COVID-19 virus and had recovered. Furthermore, because of the pandemic, the therapy sessions had to take place online, which gives this study a bounded focus.

Five important questions should be answered before choosing an intrinsic case study as a research approach (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Firstly, are there clear boundaries around the case and is an in-depth understanding the goal of the researchers? In this study the boundaries were very clear. Sampling was purposive, which means that a homogenous group of participants was included. An invitation to take part in the research study was placed on the social media platform for music teachers on Facebook. Self-employed music teachers who tested positive for COVID-19 were invited. When there was no reaction from the Facebook post, the researchers asked old colleagues if they knew of anybody who would suit the inclusion criteria. The researcher, who was also the therapist, had not been involved in teaching for eight years, so no old colleagues were in a dependent relationship with the researcher. This way of finding participants is called 'snowballing'. Snowballing means that one interested person who meets the inclusion criteria tells somebody else who they know also suits the inclusion criteria (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). All participants were informed of all expectations of the study. After agreeing, an email was sent explaining the study in detail and a consent form was attached. Only five participants took part in group MI sessions. Classically trained South African music teachers who taught instrumental music to individuals in their private capacity and had contracted the coronavirus, and who thus also suffered a loss of income, were eligible to participate in the study. All the teachers were from the same cultural group. The similarity in identity and thus overlapping experiences and knowledge of music and music genres were to be expected in such a homogeneous group (Nuse *et al.*, 2022).

Secondly, is there a specific issue to be focused on? In our case study, the issue was helping music teachers who had all been infected with the COVID-19 virus and had recovered, yet there were obvious deep-seated impacts in each case. We wanted to

explore the meaning that participants ascribed to their lived experiences of MI sessions in a group. Thus, their personal experiences were of the essence (Wheeler, 2016), as well as finding out how and if group MI sessions were meaningful to them. Each participant had four individual MI sessions after which the group sessions took place.

The third prerequisite for a case study is collecting data from multiple sources. In our study, we used drawings that were created during the sessions, participants' feedback during sessions, observations by the therapist, as well as a focus group interview with the group after the sessions. The participants discussed their drawings, which were always free drawings without prior instructions other than to draw what you feel whilst listening to the music. Drawings and the use of colours were compared too. Discussing the drawings makes it easier to also discuss feelings and give even more descriptive feedback. The therapist made notes of the observations and added these notes to the feedback. Furthermore, the analysis itself was shared with the participants to ensure engagement over a long time, not only during the sessions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Participants could give feedback on the analysis, and new insights were then shared with the other participants. Drawing on this range of sources contributes to the validity of the study (Creswell, 2014).

A fourth dimension for the case study approach is a systematic analysis which can provide a clear description of the case. In our study, we transcribed all the data, which were then, together with the drawings, included as one heuristic unit in the ATLAS.ti 23 qualitative data analysis software. These verbatim transcriptions from all the sessions, including discussions of the drawings, participants' feedback, the therapist's input and focus group data were entered into ATLAS.ti 23. The data transcriptions were read, re-read and coded. The software was then used to highlight words and concepts that came up regularly. This assisted with the coding and categorising of the qualitative data. Themes were then identified from the categories and codes. The thematic analysis was done according to the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). These steps include (1) reading through the transcribed data, (2) re-reading and initial coding of quotations in light of the purpose of the study, (3) generating initial themes, and (4) reviewing the themes. In step 5, themes are finalised and named, and the last step is to write up the findings.

As suggested by Creswell and Poth (2016), the findings should be reported in a reflective way. The first author had multiple roles, including that of researcher and therapist. An important requirement is to take ethical and professional responsibility in the role as a researcher, but also for the clinical relationship with participants in the role as a therapist (Ansdell & Pavlicevic, 2001). As the only qualified MI therapist in South Africa, the necessary experience to conduct these sessions and make sense of the data collected afterwards was a great responsibility taken on with caution. The second researcher, who was not the therapist in the study, made a huge contribution in terms of providing external analysis and verification. Furthermore, reflective reporting was ensured by applying member checking, and participants were asked for feedback after the analysis process. In addition, our study reports the findings by reflectively and critically comparing them to previous similar studies. Since the MI method is novel in the South African context, we were curious and interested to see whether any of the themes or outcomes would be unusual or surprising when compared with previous studies. Outcomes related to the constructs of positive psychology, such as character strengths, were examined through the lens of positive psychology. This was another novel perspective of this study.

PROCEDURES

The group sessions were unique in that, because of the COVID-19 restrictions implemented at the time in South Africa, all sessions and the focus group took place online. We used Zoom as a platform to meet. Due to the fact that sessions were online, participants could choose their pseudonyms, not only for the purpose of staying anonymous for the research project, but also as group members. All participants chose the name of a composer or performer as a pseudonym¹, possibly because they all felt comfortable in the realm of composers. They were asked to label their Zoom identification with their pseudonyms as well. One participant in the group requested not to use cameras, so the sessions were completely anonymous, as we could only hear each other. Although the blank screen felt very unusual and isolating, there was a freedom to share anything without any hesitation or holding back. Some comments from the participants pointed towards vulnerability, all related to their experiences with COVID-19. The anonymised meetings helped to mitigate further feelings of vulnerability.

In an individual resource-oriented session, the therapist and client will decide on a feature to focus on together, e.g. self-assurance, and collaboratively select music that links to this point of focus by listening to short extracts of possible pieces of music. Then, the chosen piece of music is played repeatedly whilst the client draws whatever the music elicits (Summer, 2015). In the group sessions, the group collaboratively decided on a focus for the session. Finding a focus happens very organically: After we checked in with everybody, the therapist would suggest ideas for the focus of the session from what had been said. In the first session, the theme 'courage' came up, since everybody was new to the concept and the group, and perhaps even a little bit scared. This meant that they were brave to be present. Once the focus 'courage' was established, each group member was given an opportunity to suggest a piece of music from their personal playlists which would suit the focus. A short excerpt of each suggested piece of music was played, and once again, the group decided collaboratively which piece they wanted to use for further exploring the focus on paper. While the music plays, each participant draws freely. There are no prior instructions or judgement. It is made clear to participants that the drawing should be a natural cause of the listening. It is not about the product, but about the process. Drawing whilst listening helps with internal focus, and it serves as an analytical tool afterwards for each individual. Participants are encouraged to be led by the music, but their emotions in the moment, or ideas around the theme or anything else, could also be the stimulus for their drawing. The therapist suggests that they listen to the music for a while before starting to draw as to allow them to get into the space and the music to be their guide.

The focus of the first session was about trying to acknowledge their own bravery, and the music that was chosen for this session was Ralph Vaughan Williams's 'Silent noon' performed by Ian Bostridge. The focus for the second session, as determined by the group, was 'their journey towards their own oasis'. Although the focus was on their journey towards an oasis, the drawing was still free. There was no instruction given that they had to draw an oasis, but simply to allow the music to guide them. This time, the music was the 'Trio for flute, oboe and piano', the second movement (Andante semplice), composed by Madeleine Dring. Because of the bonds that were created during these sessions, 'trust' came up in the third

¹ The pseudonyms were Billie Holiday, Chopin, Liszt, Schumann and Wolf. For the sake of clarity, the first time each pseudonym is used in the text, it will be indicated with an asterisk*.¹

session as a focal point. In this session, the group listened to all the pieces of music and drew for each piece. The music used in the third session was as follows:

Horn Concerto No. 4 (Rondo) by Mozart

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6lahDdvnop8ywxGtohMVE?si=6b0e6b8b4e3c4183>

Orfeo ed Euridice ‘Danse des champs elysées’, by Gluck, arranged for flute and piano

<https://open.spotify.com/track/1pIQdAhNn5NniAzIYJy59Y?si=3491d65701bf4cb5>

‘Pilgrims Chorus’ from *Tannhauser* by Wagner

<https://open.spotify.com/track/2oFkS2di723pt81mOVLW2K?si=e1c86668125141eb>

‘Jupiter’ from *The Planets* by Holst

<https://open.spotify.com/track/59Id4KrBWiizuq53doxWtp?si=16f63f55cc2a4894>

‘Trust in me’ from the film *Jungle Book* by Debney

<https://open.spotify.com/track/6UtpOAQMPOYVDHBhj0o0CF?si=7f9089cbe9a84c59>

‘I believe’ by Andrea Bocelli and Katherine Jenkins

<https://open.spotify.com/track/0IEtNAIZT7BbWyMZbHNDhy?si=ce37c4b0c37c4fcc>

The participants drew whilst the music played. I asked them to tilt their screens at an angle where only their hands and drawing materials were visible, and switch on their cameras. In this way, I could see each participant’s image unfold and still feel involved in the process (Figure 1). This also assisted with knowing how many times the music had to be repeated.



Figure 1. A screenshot taken during a listening and drawing process

FINDINGS

In the findings section, the themes, as they emerged from the focus group data, will be discussed. The researchers found that the themes were clearly distilled in the focus group that was held after the three group sessions, illuminated by examples from discussions during the sessions. Images will further supplement the discussion of themes as the images are representations of each participant’s individual experiences and their interpretation of the music.

The following themes emerged from the data:

- 1) Openness to different music choices: all five participants were open to exploring new or unknown music. Even though they did have similar backgrounds, training and tastes in music, they were willing to explore jazz, film music, and light world music.
- 2) Vulnerability: all participants felt exposed by having to share experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3) Connection: in spite of feeling vulnerable, there was a great need to connect after the isolation during the pandemic.
- 4) Universality: in this context the term refers to participants becoming aware, as they shared their experiences, that none of their fears and issues were unique, but were experienced by others too.
- 5) Character strengths: these were highlighted through sharing difficult material.
- 6) Trust: participants started to trust the music, the process and each other through these sessions.

The themes are connected in a specific way, as can be seen in Figure 2. All participants have music in common and their openness to exploring new music was a great help to connect with each other in the group, especially because all participants understood each other's feelings of vulnerability. Through the process of listening, acknowledging vulnerability and connecting with each other, the realisation that many human ideas, thoughts and needs are 'universal' was recognised. Through working together in a group, various character strengths of each participant were highlighted. Lastly, the process lent itself to building trust.

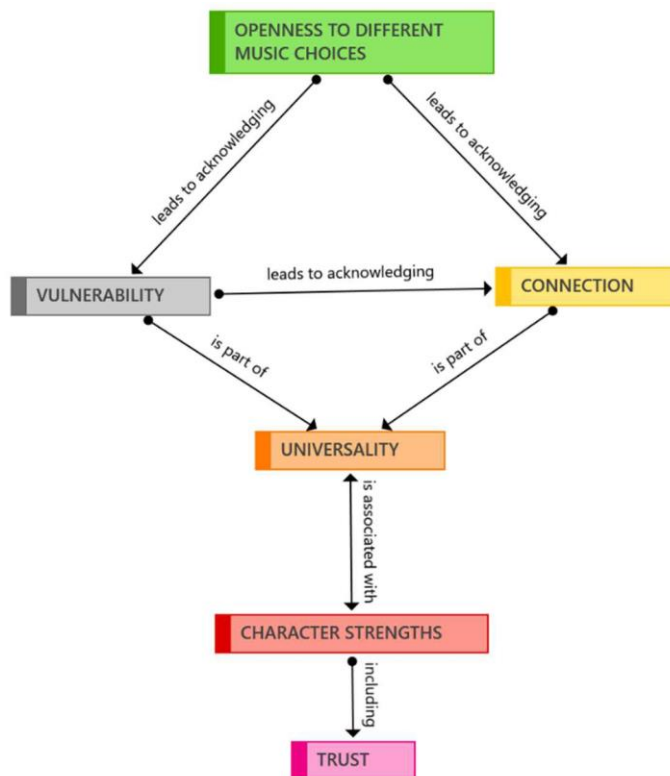


Figure 2. Representation of relationships between themes

THEME 1: OPENNESS TO DIFFERENT MUSIC CHOICES

It was “a revelation” for Liszt* when she realised that “other people don’t listen to what I like. It is important to extend one’s knowledge about music and other types of music that exist. It was good for me”. Chopin* said that he knew “exactly what music fits with what emotion”. He found it “different to incorporate someone else’s connection between emotion and music”. He also said that, in spite of this knowing, he could “accept another’s choice and it was good”. He also added that he would have been “100% honest” if he felt he could not work with somebody else’s choice. Furthermore, he had a strong experience of connection with other participants’ ideas and choices of music: “At first, I thought, ooh, I hope I am going to do justice to what they mean, but you said time and time again: trust the music”.

Schumann* found it enriching to listen to other people’s music choices:

I did not have a preconceived idea or felt that my opinion had to be considered here. You know one is open to whatever comes your way. And music is music; we enjoy it anyway. It is not going to be ugly. Even hip-hop would have brought up an emotion, even if it was an uncomfortable emotion. I felt comfortable. If we did not have the music, I might have felt less comfortable.

In the second session, Schumann spoke about listening to the “intervals and the harmonies” of the chosen music. Billie* said that “the music touched me and the pathos of life...”. The group setting, to a great extent, facilitated an openness to listening to unfamiliar music. Three participants commented on some kind of surprise element for them. Billie was “surprised that I could offer my own music”, whilst Chopin was honest about the relief that “all the choices were acceptable to me”, and “surprised that the group chose my music in the first sessions”. Liszt mentioned that she felt “surprised about what music they chose”.

It was valuable that participants disagreed on the choice of music. Chopin, who was so outspoken about being “old school”, also mentioned later that “one has also learnt that one doesn’t need to lose one’s head over somebody else’s choice”. Schumann felt that even when someone gave an opinion about the music, “in the end, I could always think of something (to draw)”. For Billie, the different music choices brought an important opportunity to learn something about music, different genres and other people’s choices. It also afforded an opportunity for personal growth:

It was difficult because I teach all kinds of music. All of a sudden these people with their vast knowledge about classical music: It was almost overwhelming! I can’t keep up. And then I had to realise that maybe that was the whole point. I was bowled over by the participants’ know-how, so I wrote down what everyone said. I felt a little shy about the choices I had in my head, maybe more jazz or pop music. So I sometimes felt I am hitting a blank, and I don’t normally hit blanks.

Thus, the group setting also contributed to participants feeling vulnerable. This became clear in the second theme. However, it was good to notice how vulnerability was not seen as a weakness but as an opportunity to grow.

THEME 2: VULNERABILITY

All participants felt vulnerable in some way. For some, this vulnerability was directly linked to the COVID-19 experience. In this sense, the concept of “feeling vulnerable” was mentioned by each participant, especially in the first session. Schumann said: “I think courage is good as it also refers to the anxiety that some of

us feel”. Liszt added: “I am excited, and I want to take part as COVID-19 was very traumatic for me”, and Billie: “I am also excited, but also a bit anxious, and for the road I need to walk from here on”. Wolf* mentioned:

I didn’t know what to expect, and so I came in very vulnerably, and I thought: ‘Now what do I have to expose about myself here?’ But, like I said, it was step-by-step, so I never felt uncomfortable. I found it very therapeutic.

In the first session, Liszt explained her vulnerability through her image (Figure 3):

I noticed, the longer the music was playing the more red I was using (laughs). I did not realise how much anger I was carrying inside of me during this time. No one on earth deserves this kind of trauma and anger about how dare you do this to the world, and anger about how people are still suffering. I realise I’ll have to work on it because it has obviously appeared while I was drawing, and it sits in my subconscious. I am such a positive person, but I realise now that I need to work on the buried anger that is inside of me due to this whole thing. While I was drawing, I went back to that experience of the ‘scream’ faces that haunted me whilst in hospital.



Figure 3. Liszt’s courage image, where the red signifies her feelings of anger

Note: This image is from session 1; the music was [Vaughan Williams’s ‘Silent noon’](#)

Wolf mentioned that she is always taking the lead, so she felt a little vulnerable when she had to stand back and hear “others’ opinions and emotions first”. Vulnerability was present in Chopin, who felt strongly about his music choice but worried about coming across as judgemental, until he realised: “...but one has also learnt that you don’t need to lose your head over somebody else’s choice”. Liszt’s vulnerability was about sharing her music in the group: “First I thought, oh hell, I should have thought about music beforehand, like a pathetic: ‘what now?’ But it taught me to think on my feet, and I want to do it in future”.

Schumann said that becoming vulnerable in sessions “opened a new small window” for her. Billie said that she knew “this is a healing space and a vulnerable space and a place where we could be who we are. I like that idea of taking small steps, you know”. Wolf felt a little vulnerable about her drawings: “And you said just draw what feels right, possibly because when we grow up, especially in music, that note is wrong, that chord, this is wrong, that is right. So, it was wonderful. And that is

how I would like to share that”. During the situation of vulnerability, Chopin noticed:

I think one has found a commonality every time we came together. We all feel anxiety, pain, sadness and heartache. And I could feel what others felt because I could feel it too. I think it would have been difficult if there were emotions that I was not familiar with”.

Billie said: “Initially, I was a little overwhelmed by the emotions and it was difficult to start drawing. It was extremely important to go with the flow and the tenderness of life, like the tendrils that come out”.

The realisation that there was no expectation to be perfect made sharing easier and brought the next theme, connection, to the fore. Connection as a theme was possible only in the group setting. This was noted by all participants, even though they all preferred the individual sessions for the sake of their personal growth.

THEME 3: CONNECTION

Particularly during COVID-19, while we all felt isolated, there was a strong need for connection. Chopin put it in a unique way:

We experienced COVID-19 together, but we also experienced life together, it was about self-awareness, and that is the thing. What I wanted was to have an experience that could contribute to my emotional health, and there was definitely that element. Where I could say: I found a feeling that could help me. I can be with people and could share how I feel, but I can also feel myself.

Billie added:

We could feel there is a community, like a communal experience. Sharing was one of my favourite parts of the experience, purely because there I could experience each person’s inner heart. I could start to taste it in the music choices, for sure, but I really found it special. I really felt everyone was honest. It gave such a warm feeling. You know this shared humanity and then we were also all vulnerable together, that was good for me, and it started to feel like I was getting to know the people here.

Connection was also discussed in some images. When discussing her drawing from the second session (Figure 4), Billie commented: “It felt like little plants that come out very gently and then also the symbol of eternity and the connection between life and death, and so many people close to us died in the past year. So, it just came up again. It is part of life and part of the story, but you can feel safe in that”.



Figure 4. Billie’s image symbolising the oasis where one can feel safe

Note: This image is from session 2; the music was [Dring's 'Trio for flute, oboe and piano', 2nd movement](#) (Andante semplice)

Chopin felt that the connection took place in sharing ideas about music choices: “I actually felt more connected to each person, and I trusted that there would be some other kind of connection between us in the music, and that was important for me to experience”. Liszt said: “The feedback was the best! The reality comes to the fore. Without you having planned it. I loved to hear the others’ stories, to hear each one’s experiences”.

There were also comments about sharing with others outside of the group. Schumann said that music and imagery were something that she wanted “to try now with my children, those I taught as well as my own little girl. To put on some music and draw while we listen”. Wolf echoed this when she said, “I want to do this fresh with my singing and piano students, one session, maybe once a month”. This kind of sharing would be a new way to connect with their students.

Billie spoke about how she connected in a unique way with her students, by sharing her own experiences with them:

It was so great when students entered and asked what these drawings [from our sessions] were, and I told them that I was part of this process and I thought it was so valuable to introduce them to this kind of work because we are so stuck in ‘producing’; nothing wrong with that, but there are other things that can also happen that is meaningful, so I hope a new generation can be educated into this kind of therapy and processes.

The group sessions also created opportunities for the development of the theme of ‘universality’. Chopin commented that he experienced the group sessions as “shared humanity”. He said: “Through a process of conversation, you distil different thoughts a little bit and find something, a central theme, that the whole group agreed on”.

THEME 4: UNIVERSALITY

Chopin explained himself as follows:

We are all the same. We are different, but we came together to feel the same as a person, as a human being. We feel the same, and yet we feel different things, but it was all so interlinked, and it was nice to share with others about their pain because you have the same pain, and that was nice.

Billie then responded to Chopin’s comment: “Chopin, in the first session you said that we are all still here and it’s okay. I felt that shared humanity in that verbal sharing. It gave a deeper meaning to me that I enjoyed”. Wolf added how she loved that everyone “tuned in”. The value of “different interpretations” was also noticed by Wolf and Schumann, who mentioned: “It was interesting to hear and share anonymous people’s opinions and experiences”. These comments highlight the universal need for sharing and the value placed on other people’s interpretations.

Schumann shared how she felt that there is a universal need for nourishment and health through her image (Figure 5) articulated during the second session:

The green is the idea of the oasis, and the rest is everybody, and everybody with all their needs, are drawn to the oasis. It does not matter whether people are good or bad, at some point, one is drawn to an oasis. That is basically what my image is saying.

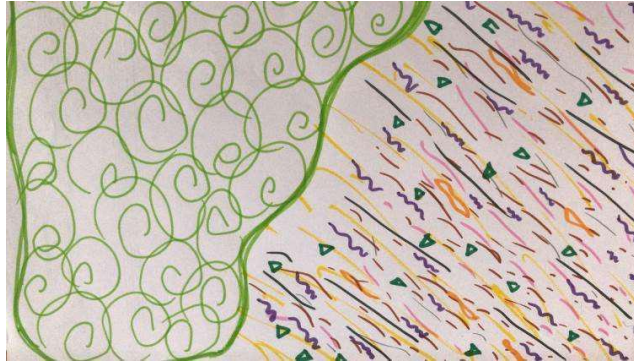


Figure 5. Schumann’s image of the green oasis and everybody is drawn towards it

Note: This image is from session 2; the music was [Dring’s ‘Trio for flute, oboe and piano’, 2nd movement](#) (Andante semplice)

Chopin explained his experience in the same session (Figure 6), where participants wanted to journey towards their own oasis, as a universal journey:

By the third repetition, these footsteps developed, and they began alone, and then I realised that we all had an experience together. And it helps to get through it when you realise that everybody had sadness and difficulty and that you were not alone.

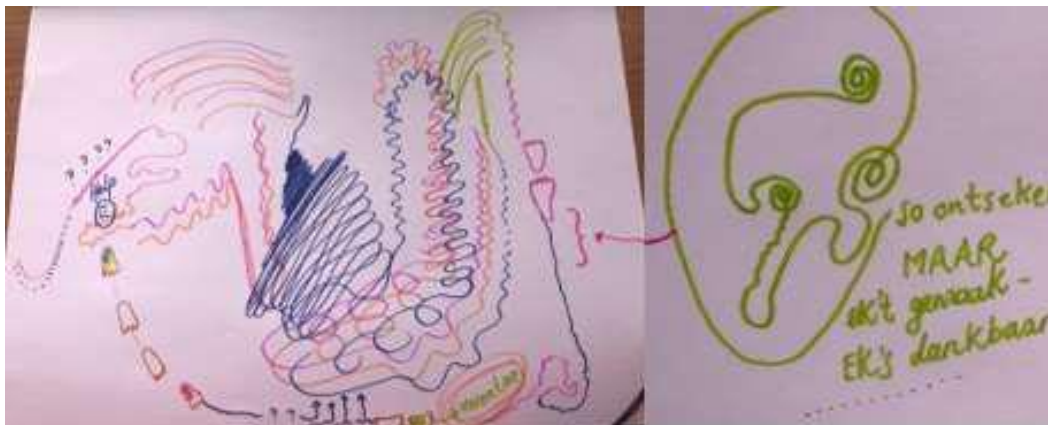


Figure 6. Chopin’s image represents the human struggle to get to the oasis ².

Note: This image is from session 2; the music was [Dring’s ‘Trio for flute, oboe and piano’, 2nd movement](#) (Andante semplice).

Possibly because all participants were music teachers, music played an even more important role as part of the therapy. Billie mentioned: “We share it with each other, and I can trust that because we are all part of that kind of world”. Wolf elaborated on how the music was part of the universal human need for sharing and acceptance that came across in the sessions:

I had no problem with the music. Everything worked for me; it fell into place, it was 100%. I think because we could all share from our hearts and how we really felt, you know... the truth sets you free. And whatever you brought to

² The text on the right-hand side means: ‘So unsure, BUT I made it! I am grateful...’

the altar was accepted, and it brought a fresh aroma, fresh fragrance, and it just built towards the whole picture.

THEME 5: CHARACTER STRENGTHS

Character strengths, as defined by Peterson and Seligman (2004) include 24 specific strengths. Many of them were often foregrounded in the discussions. Character strengths such as *courage* and *hope* were present in the data. We discussed how the participants all had to be so brave after being infected with the COVID-19 virus. Furthermore, they were courageous enough to be part of this therapeutic process. Courage was also shown in their allowing themselves to be vulnerable. Other character strengths were also present.

Schumann admitted that she “had to be *open-minded* to join the process”, and Wolf was the first to mention her *gratitude* in the focus group discussion:

For me, it is about how everyone had to take small steps, and sometimes you could not follow in someone else’s footsteps, but then you were brought back onto the right track, and at the end of the session, there is a unity in spirit a unity in mind, and emotions and healing. My partner certainly enjoyed seeing how much it meant to me, and when I showed my artworks to my children, they always said how beautiful it was for them to see.

Chopin mentioned how grateful he felt when he arrived at his oasis: “There I got to *gratitude*. I am grateful, and that is my oasis”. Billie also spoke about her gratitude after the sessions had an impact on a long-lasting problem: “You have seen that things that were stuck for ten years became unstuck, and it led to gigantic growth in many different ways”.

Billie could testify to experiencing strengths such as *spaciousness*, *growth*, and *optimism*:

When we started, the gentleness of the music touched me, and it gave me solace, and there is also spaciousness in the music. That is why the soft curves came out. Lots of curves, and they can go in any direction. So, you don’t need to feel pressured to go in a particular direction (Figure 7). That thing of optimism, but I don’t need to rush, I don’t need to do anything immediately. That feeling of spacious time. And also, where the voice swells, the curves swell, but the space is still there, and there is space to just ‘be’. I am an A-type personality, and I need to do things, and this led me to be okay with sitting back a bit and also the freedom to choose the direction. Lots of things are happening in my life, some good, some not so wonderful, but this helps me to realise there is space. When I turn the picture around, it looks like a seedling that is just starting to grow, which excites me.



Figure 7. Billie’s courage image, where the big swirls signify her feelings of spaciousness

Note: This image is from session 1; the music was [Vaughan Williams's 'Silent noon'](#)

Schumann recalled a reassuring moment she experienced during her hospitalisation, which strengthened her *faith* (spirituality being a character strength):

I had a near-death experience with my COVID-19, and those images came up in that moment and a voice that said, 'everyone is going to be okay'. It was nice to get to that place again. You have reminded me of that place. I could access that place again, and the voice that said everyone is going to be okay. When everything gets too overwhelming, that is a safe place to go to, and one can remember that voice and that feeling: the feeling of absolute peace and then the voice that speaks[...]

Chopin experienced deep emotions and *awe*; appreciation of beauty is a character strength, which he expressed in the following words: "I expected that there would be a cognitive belief shift in my head, but what I got was an emotive experience, and the music was a vehicle to move forward. The experience was beautiful and intense and fantastic"! Chopin also spoke about hope:

There was so little hope, and all the questions and then the decision: I am going to try, and at the end, it all worked out. The feeling that I got was a re-look at my personal journey through COVID-19. It is a quiet, a stillness. A feeling of personal stillness that I have made it. My heart soft and touched. Stillness and calmness; that is what I feel now. That feeling of sitting in a cathedral and experiencing the magnificence of life, faith and hope. These are softly knocking on the door of courage. The topography of the music is a journey which I could have undertaken even without the text.

Schumann found the process to be a *creative* way to deal with her emotions, which is another character strength:

The nicest was to sit back and draw, rather than to talk about your feelings. I felt a freedom to do what I wanted. I don't like talking about how I feel. And although drawing was not the easiest for me, when I realised that it did not matter, anything is fine, just let the colours flow and just take out what you have to give, then it became very enjoyable for me.

Cognitive strength, also part of the character strengths, was important for Billie:

I wanted something to guide me for the time between sessions, like courage or bravery or hope. Those things I took seriously, and I worked cognitively with them. I leaned back into the artwork because it is concrete. I want to see it, I want to paste it on the wall, and it must help me a little.

THEME 6: TRUST

Trust was the focus in one of our sessions, but it also came up in the focus group data as a theme. Several aspects that had not been mentioned in the session discussions were raised in the focus group. Wolf and Schumann both explicitly spoke about the "safe space" that was provided during the sessions, and how that helped them to trust the process. Chopin, Liszt, Schumann and Billie all mentioned how they could "trust the music" to help them express themselves without "the fear of being judged".

Two participants referred to how enriching it was to experience different interpretations of trust. This was enabled by the focus of the third session. Each

group member, including the therapist, chose their own music, and the group drew to all the pieces (Figure 8). Wolf said: “It was nice for me to see how another person’s going to interpret a word, and how I am going to interpret somebody else’s”. Schumann mentioned the following:

I also think it was new to hear what other people’s interpretations of trust was. You always only have your own idea, so it was good to see the concept of trust being thrown into a washing machine and to see what comes out of it.



Figure 8. Wolf’s images of all six pieces of music representing each participant’s idea of trust

Note: This image is from session 3. The links to the music are at the beginning of the ‘Findings’ section.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how music teachers experienced group MI sessions. Findings showed that working as a group was beneficial for the participants. The participants in this study found the connection with others important, and they realised that many of the issues, struggles, questions and emotions —also those brought on by the pandemic— were universal. In the group setting, participants felt that it was safe to expose their difficult emotions and become vulnerable where the support of the group was present and non-judgemental. This led group members to acknowledge their own character strengths, and an important sense of trust was established.

The importance of trust, feeling safe, and not being judged can lead to growth and insight for the individual. This is then acknowledged and witnessed by others. In the group setting, there was space for individual meaning-making as well as shared meaning-making. Knowing that others have similar questions and emotions increases self-acceptance and gives meaning to one’s own life. The benefits of such strengthening in a group cannot be underestimated.

Participants in this study referred to the values of group sessions, considering all aspects, including the music —which is highly emotive— their images, and emotions. Putting one’s subjective feelings onto paper as a representation helped to regulate the feelings. They found the feedback in the group very valuable.

The literature confirms that group therapy can be beneficial (Moe, 2012; Summer, 2019). Inpatients with varied treatment programmes reported that their participation in group receptive music therapy was a valuable component of their recovery. They

also made specific references to images, symbols and emotions that came to the fore during the receptive music therapy sessions (Moe, 2012).

Data in this study that refer to connection and the shared needs of participants can be compared to findings in Kim's (2020) study, as well as the study by Rudstam (2023). In the study by Kim (2020), five themes were explored with MI as the method. MI trainees were the participants, and they also reported successful group experiences, such as the awareness of the influence of the group, the support in the group, and positive emotions; trust; expansive experiences and new insights; restrictions of individual sessions and support in the group. Rudstam (2023) identified eight themes, including empowerment, safety, playfulness, connection through music, non-verbal expressions, overcoming resistance, feeling part of a group; and sharing challenging and good memories. Perceptions of supportive characteristics of the group, a theme in Kim's (2020) study, can be compared to comments in the current study about shared experiences, new music, new insights and perspectives. The first theme of the current study refers to the experience of openness towards different music choices. Similarly, Kim (2020) refers to expansive experiences in one of her themes.

Themes such as safety, feeling part of a group, and connection through music, which are clear in the study by Rudstam (2023), are echoed in the current study's themes 'connection' and 'openness towards music choices'. Also, the theme of 'vulnerability' resonates with the sharing of challenging and good memories in Rudstam's (2023) study.

The important principle of trust, which was one of the themes in this study, is echoed in the second theme of Kim's (2020) study. Trust in the group that led to enjoyment, but also the sense of safety in opening up and being willing to become vulnerable, were clear in the current study. Similar concepts in groupwork were also noticed by Solli *et al.* (2013). In a meta-synthesis, Solli *et al.* (2013) identified four areas where group music therapy was meaningful, namely "having a good time", "being together", "feeling", and "being someone".

Theme 5 of the current study, namely character strengths, needs special mention as there are so many parallels with the literature in positive psychology on character strengths. Creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, a love of learning and a sense of perspective were all found in the data of this study. These are all grouped under the virtue of wisdom and knowledge, according to Peterson and Seligman (2004). The second virtue that Peterson and Seligman (2004) mention is courage. This virtue was clear in the data collected under the theme of vulnerability, as one cannot show or overcome vulnerability without being brave. Rudstam (2023) also explored a theme of empowerment and overcoming initial resistance.

Under both the themes of connection and universality, the following character strengths were represented in the data: love, kindness and social intelligence were represented. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), these character strengths fall under the third virtue: humanity. The way in which topics were chosen, as well as the attitude of participants when choosing the music for each topic, highlighted the virtue of justice, which includes character strengths such as leadership, teamwork and fairness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Self-regulation, forgiveness, and prudence came to the fore under the theme of vulnerability. This finding relates to the fifth virtue, which is temperance. Character strengths that are grouped under the umbrella term 'temperance' include forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation.

Appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour as well as spirituality were expressed in the data. These correspond with the virtue of transcendence according to Peterson and Seligman's (2004) categories. Virtues have the potential to counteract problems, especially the kind of problems that are inherent in humans (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). This understanding confirms what emerged from the data of the current study. All participants could gain insight through their processes to face problems that were deepened by the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted the meaningfulness of experiencing group MI sessions. The importance of supportive group music therapy is emphasised by Summer (2019). She explains how the imagery can provide participants with a 'catalyst for immediate and positive interpersonal interaction'. This is exactly what was experienced by the participants in the current study. However, when participants in this study were asked to compare group sessions to individual sessions, all participants claimed to have benefited more from the individual sessions. On the other hand, the last theme in Kim's (2020) study was 'Restricted experiences during individual sessions.' That theme emerged in the data when the participants were asked the same question as the one in the current study, namely: What were the main differences between individual sessions and group sessions? A possible reason for this discrepancy might be that in Kim's (2020) study, the participants were MI trainees, whilst in the current study, participants were music teachers. When one is training to become an MI therapist, feedback and acknowledgement from other trainees are quite important. This is how one learns from one another's input, whilst one's insecurities as a trainee are still present in the individual sessions. This might be a reason why the individual sessions felt restrictive to Kim's (2020) participants. In the current study, all the participants went through the troublesome time and distancing circumstances of the pandemic. They consequently felt a greater need for interaction with the therapist on an individual level, which would enable them to share their personal issues. The value of group MI sessions and individual MI sessions is different for each individual. Questions concerning the different experiences should be explored in further research.

A limitation of this study was, certainly, especially because of the need for interaction, the fact that the sessions took place in a virtual space. Under 'normal circumstances', sessions would have been conducted in person, and participants would have had an opportunity to get to know each other in a more authentic way. The role of the empathetic and warm therapist in group MI cannot be underestimated (Hertrampf, 2017). This was challenging in online group work. Similarly, the therapist's role as activator of the here-and-now experience (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) is also jeopardised by the online situation, as there is no real way to know if all participants, each in their own space, are staying in the here-and-now. Lastly, transference and countertransference, both real factors in group therapy (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005), can become problematic in a virtual space. However, contrary to studies describing group MI sessions, where the therapist selected the music beforehand (Hertrampf, 2017), all participants in the current study were given opportunities to suggest music from their personal playlists. Although this was empowering, some participants expressed fear of being judged for their choices. This work would have been much easier sitting in a room together. Anxiety and depression were two themes identified in Hertrampf's (2017) study with cancer patients. This seems natural with such a participant group, and it can be described as a cathartic experience. Yalom and Leszcz (2005) claim that catharsis is an

important factor of group psychotherapy. Catharsis will certainly be challenging in a virtual space, if not impossible, although challenging emotions were explored by participants in the current study. On the other hand, the fact that everything was anonymous contributed to open sharing. The positive and negative sides of online therapy were confirmed in a study by Honig and Hannibal (2022). They conducted interviews with two participants about in-person versus online music therapy sessions. Two important factors were highlighted in the results. First, there was a strong relationship between the participant and the therapist, which initially felt less personal during virtual therapy. Second, as familiarity with the format and the technology grew, both felt that the therapy was, although less powerful, still effective and acceptable.

The fact that all participants were classically trained music teachers could possibly be seen as a limitation, particularly when the group's music choices are considered. Most choices were from the so-called lighter classical genre. Even though some choices included music from other genres, e.g. film music, light pop and jazz, the group always settled for a piece of music close to their training.

MI is designed to use the client's music, and yet, in this study, very few genres were explored. A different outcome could be possible if the group was representative of different cultural groups.

Another limitation could be the fact that only three group sessions were held. However, in a study by De Kock and Lotter (2023), which explored single-session music therapy groupwork, the outcomes showed clear benefits, including consistent personal engagement. More research is needed to explore long-term versus short-term therapy MI sessions.

Lastly, having meaningful relations with the self and others can strengthen and help create meaningful experiences in all areas of life. The MI sessions described in this study showed promising results in terms of enhancing the well-being of people, especially meaning-making and maintenance. The study also enabled the exploration of many of the constructs of positive psychology such as hope, open-mindedness, gratitude, courage and resilience, especially as applied after the disruptions of the pandemic. MI therapy sessions might be a good starting point to help people flourish again. The results of this study should be a motivation for further research, especially in connecting the fields of positive psychology and receptive music therapy.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Petra Jerling holds a PhD in Visual and Performing Arts with music from the North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa, and is an extraordinary researcher at MASARA. She is a certified music psychotherapist in private practice. She is a qualified BMGIM and MI therapist and is a committee member of EAMI (European Association of Music and Imagery) and of MSW (Music, Spirituality and Well-being international network). She has published in the *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy* and *Music Therapy Today*, *Religions*, *Voices*, *Approaches* and *The International Journal of Education and the Arts*, and recently co-edited two volumes titled: *Autoethnographies in Music Spirituality and Well-being* for Peter Lang publishers. She has presented papers at the WCMT, SA-ACAPAP, MSW and the 2022 and 2024 EAMI conferences.

Liesl van der Merwe is professor in the School of Music at the North-West University, South Africa. Her research interests lie in music and well-being, Positive Psychology in music education, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, music and spirituality, and lived musical experiences. She supervises postgraduate studies and teaches research methodology, music education and bassoon. She has published articles in high-impact journals such as *Psychology of Music*, *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *International Journal of Research in Music Education*, *Music Education Research* and *Frontiers in Psychology*. Liesl is co-editor of two volumes titled: *Autoethnographies in Music Spirituality and Well-being* for Peter Lang publishers. Liesl also performs in chamber music ensembles and is the conductor of the North-West Youth Orchestra.

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