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## Possibilities of Human Healing through Music: The Igbo Experience

**Nwobu, Stella N.**

Department of Music

Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University

Uli, Anambra State, Nigeria

Telephone: +2348030917390; +2349094142870

E-mail: [nadistel@yahoo.com](mailto:nadistel@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

There are numerous instabilities in virtually all aspects of human life. In this present era, people suffer from many illnesses that affect man emotionally, physically, mentally and even socially such as mental disorder, autism, hypertension, heart attack among others. Studies have shown that some of these illnesses could be handled with appropriate music type but the problem is that most people are ignorant of the power of music in maintaining good health. Some people in the profession are also ignorant of the power of what they have or how to apply it where necessary. This paper aimed at revealing the possibilities of maintaining good health through music with particular reference to the Igbo people of Nigeria. It centred on the ability of music to improve the mental, physical, emotional, social, aesthetic and spiritual health of patients. It employed a multidimensional approach involving musicological, sociological, historical and anthropological tools which included participant observation, bibliographical, discographic and interview of informants. This paper revealed that music has always been an indispensable art in human existence. It has many effects on human health. It improves brain function, repairs brain damage, boost immune system, reduce stress levels, and aid stroke recovery. It therefore recommends among others that serious awareness should be created in different institutions, markets, and churches of the power of music in healing. More hospitals should engage the services of music therapists to help their patients to experience fast healing through music. There should be formation of music therapy guild which should incorporate as many musicians as possible who are going to be more engaged in human healing through music. This paper will be beneficial and useful to scholars, hospitals and individuals who come across it. It will be an eye opener for lots of people who are ignorant of the power of music in human healing.

**Key Words:** Human, Healing, Music, Problem, Possibilities

## Introduction

The Igbo are one of the three main ethnic groups in Nigeria who took their name from their language. The way of life of the Igbo is similar in terms of language, religious and social practices. Despite the similarities, slight differences or variations exist among them. They have monarchy. The occupations of the people of Igbo include farming, fishing, blacksmithing, hunting, weaving, pottery, wine tapping, wood carving and instrument constructing. The Igbo are deeply religious and religion forms an important aspect of their everyday lives. They believe that their needs are provided through their gods and as a result, they worship their gods frequently with songs and musical instruments like metal gong, rattles, drums of different types and many others.

They have great respect and regard for their culture. Their cultural life is full of other activities which last from birth to death. Music in Igbo culture covers the physical, mental, emotional and social experiences. Under physical experiences are motor skills, which include demonstration of their songs. Within mental experiences are the intellectual levels: learning common ideas, meaningful tunes, and application of the knowledge gained to new situation and analyzing situations. Within emotional experiences music portrays methods of shaping personality and / or patterning moral concepts. In the social sphere, folk music attempt to socialize the listeners by transmitting worthwhile roles in particular, emphasizing interpersonal relationship for the good of mankind.

Music is the language of the soul, an indispensable companion in all circumstances. Music is indispensable in time of war, hardship, in time of sorrow, in time of frustration among others. Music has many functions. It is the social, emotional and cognition vehicle of society, reflecting the imprint of our present identity and the always – evolving identity. Nwobu (2015) averred that:

Music is certainly a true companion of humans as it works quite efficiently in mirroring behaviors, needs, and emotions. Music has been an efficient carrier of information that has been used for centuries as a vehicle to communicate and teach; because it effectively taps into memory (p. 9).

Music is very useful to the society. It guides the society, reflects the society, records the society and watchdogs the society. Nwobu (2015) noted that “music has immense worth. People learn many important and necessary values for life as it enhances their mind, their expressive ability and a host of other qualities” (p. 2). Music plays lots of role in the life of people. It plays a great role in keeping up the spirits of human being. Music can arouse the same feeling in one person as in another- a feeling which is not however expressed by the same words. Music could bind and heal where words and images could not.

There are different types of music which can generally be grouped into three categories, namely; vocal, instrumental and dance. Vocal music is a genre of music performed by one or more singers. It involves singing of songs, anthems, and so on. Vocal music is performed with instrumental accompaniment. When performed without instrumental accompaniment, it is called acappella. In vocal music, singing provides the main focus of the piece. Vocal music typically features sung words called lyrics or song text which usually carries the message of the song. Instrumental music is the type of music that does not engross singing, or rather music which utilizes singing, but does not feature it prominently. It is any music from any type of instrument other than the human voice. Dance music is designed for body expression. It always involves the voice, instruments and costumes. It is ubiquitous medium of communication or expression mostly in Igbo culture through which people convey ideas, communicate joys and sorrows, celebrate and mourn with the most immediate instrument- the body.

## **The Abstruse Power of Music in Human Health**

Lord Edward Bulwer Lytton says “Music is the mysterious key of memory, unlocking the hoarded treasure of the heart. Tones, at times, in music will bring back forgotten things”. Music is a magical medium that moves, enthrals, energizes and heals people. Every human illness is a musical problem and so does the healing- a musical solution. “There is no agent so powerful in giving us real rest as true music does for heart and mind and also for the body, what sleep does for the body alone” says Auguste Gratre. Music has healing power over mind and body. There are many illnesses that afflict people and music is predominantly used as a therapeutic measure in healing these afflictions.

Different therapeutic measures are taking in human healing of which music therapy is one. Music therapy is an art of using music to cure human disease and ailment including mental and physical disorder. It is defined as a systematic process of intervention wherein the therapist helps the patient to promote health using music experiences – musical interaction which can be either free or improvised and the relationships developing through them as dynamic forces of change. It includes active singing and playing instruments by patients or active listening to recorded music or both. Music medicine is employed as supplementary therapy by those who are not necessarily specialized music therapy.

Music affects human life in many ways. Music helps patients to improve or maintain their health. It strengthens moods or changes them. Through music, man can express tension and gain a release from tension. The feeling of anger and distress can be replaced by the feeling of love and tenderness through music. It controls and conveys emotion. Music is therapeutic because emotions are expressed in every moment of individual’s life, and music helps to correct and explain this specific state of mind especially if it has to do with disturbed feelings. The power of the sound of music can reduce the feeling of fatigue; increase the level of psychological arousal; physiological relaxation response; improvement in motor coordination; manages pain; improves mood and nobility; reduces the need for sedatives and pain relievers during and after surgery; decreases nausea during chemotherapy; helps patients participate in medical treatment that shortens hospital stays; relieves anxiety; lowers blood pressure; eases depression; enhances concentration and creativity; reduces stress and aids relaxation; reduces negative emotions; improves brain function; repair brain damage; boosts immune system; aids stroke recovery and helps to cope with trauma. Music has many effects on human health, physically, emotionally and mentally.

### **Physical Effects**

Music improves physical performance. Musical rhythm has the remarkable ability to move our bodies. The rhythmic structure of music can energize and bring order. Choosing music that motivates one will make it easier to start moving, walking, dancing or any other type of exercise that one enjoys. Music can make exercise feel more like recreation and less like work. Music improves and enhances athletic performance. It reduces muscle tension and improves body movement and coordination. It plays an important role in developing, maintaining and restoring physical functioning in the rehabilitation of persons with movement disorders.

Listening to music can be a great way to find some extra energy. Music can effectively eliminate fatigue symptoms caused by monotonous work. Music aids physical relaxation. It promotes relaxation of tense muscles, enabling one to easily release some of the tensions carried from a stressful day. Behavioural response to music is more evident in the form of dancing. Music activates these areas (cerebellum, basal ganglia and motor area) reported to coordinate motor movement in response to music- movements that occur while listening to music, such as a body sway, foot tap, or simple head nod. The act of playing musical instruments requires purposeful physical movement and hence it improves “psychomotor activity. Playing instruments may improve gross and fine motor coordination in dementia patients with motor impairments. In patients with dementia, singing can further help the

development of articulation, rhythm and breathe control. Musical rhythm may help them to organize time and space.

### **Emotional Effects**

“Emotions of any kind can be evoked by melody and rhythm, therefore music has the power to form character” says Aristotle. Emotions are the most challenging areas of our being because they are unpredictable and innumerable. Music influences the mind and the mind influences the body leading to alternation of emotional levels. Music can minister to the minds, pluck from it the memory of rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain and with its sweet oblivious antidote, cleanse the full bosom of all perilous stuff that weigh upon the heart. Musicians who have deep knowledge, of how music can evoke emotional responses to relax or stimulate people or help them heal, combine this knowledge with their familiarities with a wide variety of musical styles to find the specific kind that can get one through a challenging physical rehab session or guide one into meditation.

Music reduces stress. Many studies have found that soothing melodies can ease anxious feelings and quiet both blood pressure and heart rate even under very stressful conditions. “Everyday stress responds to music too” says Hanser who suggested that one should look for something that deeply focuses one’s attention, so that the worries of the day- ones concern about what happened earlier and plans for what should happen in the future –slips away. Music must grab one’s attention and at the same time relax one’s body if one wants to free one’s mind and distract oneself. Music reduces negative emotions. It can take one’s mind off what stressed him and help one feel more optimistic and positive. This helps release stress and even helps one keep from getting stressed over life’s little frustrations in the future.

Relaxing music induces sleep. It reduces sympathetic nervous system activity, decreases anxiety, blood pressure, heart and respiratory rate and may have positive effects on sleep via muscle relaxation and distraction from thought. Music can boost the immune function. Scientists explain that a particular type of music can create positive and profound emotional experience, which leads to secretion of immune boosting hormones. This helps contribute to the reduction in the factors responsible for illness. Listening to music or singing also decrease levels of stress-related hormone cortisol. High levels of cortisol can lead to a decreased immune response produced by the body in response to stress. Music heals and reliefs pain. It does have positive effects on pain management. It can help reduce both sensation and distress of both chronic pain and postoperative pain. The theories on this include that music produces repulsive effect. It may give the patients sense of control. It causes the body to release endorphinis to counteract pain. Using slow music relaxes by slowing breathing and heart beat.

### **Mental Effects**

Mentally, music activates many regions of the brain, including auditory, motor and limbic. Listening to music or playing instrument can actually make one learn better. Music has the power to enhance some kinds of higher brain function. It increases reading and literary skills, spatial temporal reasoning, mathematical abilities, emotional intelligence and recall of autobiography and episodic information. Music has numerous applications with a psychiatric setting. It can be in the form of background music, group singing sessions and music to accompany dance apart from music therapy. There are numerous benefits of the application of music in a therapeutic environment such as making positive alternation in mood and emotional states, improving concentration and attention span, developing, coping and relaxation skills, exploring self-esteem and personal insight, enhancing awareness of the self and the environment and improving social interactions. Music is not only used for healing and bringing the mentally-retarded to normality, it is also used as sedative in place of drugs to calm the nerves and bring about a soothing effect on one’s health.

Such benefits were acknowledged at Neuropsychiatric hospitals in Enugu and Anambra states which were made up of social evening classes held every Thursday (dance and music) since their establishments in 1962 and 1991 respectively. In both institutions, occupational therapists are in charge of the use of music in healing. They use music to effect healing in the lives of the patients just as prescribed drugs, used to alleviate boredom by receiving musical treatment in their occupational departments. Lack of pleasure and meaningfulness in life associated with psychiatric disorders are overcome through aesthetic experience inherent to music therapy.

### **The Effects of Music on Health: The Igbo Experience**

I crave your indulgence to begin my discussion here with a testimony given by Dr. Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto, a Lecturer in the Department of English, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. In 2003, she testified how she got healed of trauma and depression through the use of one album (Abba Father Anointed Worship Songs, Vol. 1). She was traumatized as a result of her husband's illness and she was directed by somebody to constantly play that music, which she did and got answers. This really confirmed many calls from people testifying on how they were healed by using the same music. The major problem is that most people are ignorant of the power of music in human healing. Even those in the profession are also ignorant of what they have in them (music) and what it can do to human health. Music is so powerful; its abstruse power works on people even without the knowledge of the composer.

Music in Igbo culture covers the physical, mental, emotional and social experiences. Under physical experiences are motor skills, which include demonstration of the songs. Within mental experiences are the intellectual levels: learning common ideas, meaningful tunes, and application of the knowledge gained to new situation and analyzing situations. Within emotional experience, music portrays methods of shaping personality and/or patterning moral concepts. In the social sphere, music attempts to socialize the listeners by transmitting worthwhile roles in particular, emphasizing interpersonal relationship for the good of mankind. Music is the power of the soul. The power of soul empowers one to understand, develop and apply the power of soul for healing, prevention of sickness, rejuvenation, transformation of every aspect of life, including relationship and finances and soul enlightenment. It also empowers one to develop soul wisdom and soul orders for healing and transformation of every aspect of life.

In Igbo, music is found in treating and helping those with mental ill health. Music is effective in treating pains, anxiety and tiredness in mental ill patients. Patients are also allowed to dance and exercise themselves during the music session periods. The use of music in healing calms mental patients, ease suffering as a result of clinical depression, helps to identify and express emotions, control aggressive and destructive impulses. It reduces stress and anxiety to assist in lowering the schizophrenic episode, learn adaptive behaviour patterns which allow the patients to function in the society. It improves the behaviour of the patients with moderate or severe mental disease, during agitation, difficulties and sleep problems. It also helps the patients to open a line of communication with others around them.

Music as an element of psychotherapy is used in healing to help the patients regain their inner peace. In Neuropsychiatric Hospital Nawfia, Anambra state, the social evening class involving music is held every Thursday for about 1hour as part of the hospital routine. It was transmitted via audio tapes and radio. In Neuropsychiatric Hospital Enugu, the same takes place but just about 30mins. The aim of this is to create a calm environment amid the chaos in the ward. This goes a long way in allaying anxiety and relaxed patients in critical care. Before playing the music, biography of the composer and other details about the music is disclosed to the patients which helps in facilitating uncover morbid experience. Music creates atmosphere or seduction for the patients to also sleep.

Depressed people can be healed with music. Emotionally depressed and distressed people are helped through the use of music. Neurosis and dementia patients are handled with music. Music helps in creating sense of self-worth in dementia patients. Music improves quality of life for dementia patients because, the ability to engage with music remains intact into the disease process, music therapy can help to recall memories, reduce agitation, assist communication and improve physical coordination. Music helps patients suffering from anxiety to relax, in depressed patients; music helps them to regain inner peace and brings relaxation of the mind and body. Patients suffering from mania, music are used to arrest the hyper activity as a result of the patients being forced to be calm or quiet in order to listen to the music. It can also alleviate or reduce distraction from patients suffering from auditory hallucination.

Music as a medium for emotional expression may help patients to improve their expressive range and diminish affective flattening. Music may be used as a safe and society acceptable form in which they can express feelings with ease. Music in Igbo culture has been found to induce relaxation and alter pain perception, blood pressure (*egwu na achu obara mgbanienu*) and respiratory and heart rates. Slow, soft, non-lyrical music significantly decreased systolic blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate and oxygen saturation. Music with a faster tempo significantly increased heart rate, minute ventilation, blood pressure and sympathetic nervous activity and music with complex rhythms increased, though insignificantly, the same parameter. Listening to music in Igbo is found to produce changes in blood flow and blood pressure, changes in posture, pulse rate and general activity of schizophrenics and breathing. By playing recordings of relaxing music every morning and evening, people with high blood pressure can train themselves to lower their blood pressure.

Music helps improve mental function by reducing stress and releasing dopamine. Aspects of the structures and performances of some curative music types are anaesthetic inducing calmness and unconsciousness while other induce a desired mental state such as tranquillity of nerves for a curative process to be taken. The hormone cortisol reduces in the body when people hear music they like, so calming tones can greatly lower the stress levels in turn reduce high blood pressure and decrease the risk of heart problems. People can use music to improve concentration and memory recall. Studies show that teachers who use music in the classroom have students who score higher on tests and class work. Music repairs brain damage. People who suffer a traumatic brain injury can see improvement with music therapy, with those that have impaired ability to speak, having the best results. Music helps the brain to relate to lyrics and patients can begin speaking again by singing songs. Music helps in boosting immune system. Scientific studies show that antibody levels increase in the bodies of people listening to different types of music. Music aids stroke recovery, people who suffer a stroke can improve their recovery process with music therapy. The right music helps to increase positive emotions and feelings in patients. This improves their motivation to engage in therapeutic treatment and helps patients recover speech and movement at a faster rate than using only traditional therapy. Use of music help patients accomplish specific goal like recovering their speech after a stroke or reducing the stress of chemotherapy. Music therapy can help people who are recovering from a stroke or traumatic brain injury that has damaged the left brain region responsible for speech, but singing ability originates in the right side of the brain. People can work around the injury to the left side of their brain by first singing their thoughts and then gradually dropping the melody.

Music aids pain relief. Music therapy has been tested in patients ranging from those with intense acute pain to those with chronic pain from arthritis. Overall, music therapy decreases pain perception, reduces the amount of pain medication needed, help relieve depression and gives people, a sense of better control over their pain. Music therapist Melanie Kwan says “active music engagement allowed the patients to reconnect with the healthy parts of themselves, even in the face of a debilitating condition or disease-related suffering. When their acute pain symptoms were relieved, patients were

freely able to rest. In a hospital intensive-care unit, patients on ventilators who listen to music of their choice actually relax, while those who don't hear music grow tenser. Exciting research suggests that the brain responds to music almost as if it were medicine.

As a universal phenomenon, music has a biological base. The possibility it gives to man for both physical relaxation and psychic/emotional release has engaged the attention of scientist who have demonstrated that movement is essential to both human being and animals for the release of emotional tensions caused by both joyful and painful events. Music plays a very conspicuous role in all Igbo activities. Physically music helps in the exercise of the body. This is obvious in dance music which requires body movement. In dance, the human body releases energy through muscular response to stimuli. Chukwu (1999) observed that:

Traditional music instigates. It catalyses and perpetuates physical, verbal and mental clashes in beings. It induces, inspires, incites and excites. It also demoralizes as well as intimidates. It activates and reactivates gatherings, festivals, worship, social or political rallies, etc (p. 6).

Music is also used in Igbo to keep man physically fit, to teach them the control and discipline necessary in warfare and to inculcate feelings of patriotism. Even in health programmes, traditional music helps to organize, promote and educate the people on how to take care of themselves. People suffering arthritis and rheumatism in Igbo help and heal themselves through music (dance). Dance permeates the social life of the Igbo. Not only does it offer young men and women opportunity to show off themselves, thus encouraging courtship. It provides training for work and combat. Music is very essential in masking because it has hypnotic effect. Music leads to autohypnosis and ecstasy, thus liberating participants from the day to day experiences of mind and body. With the decline of his will power, man is ruled by the moods and ideas induced by his beliefs. Through dance, the traits of the spirits are dramatized, as the masker increasingly loses consciousness of the world around. Thus the dance helps in the creation of mystical atmosphere, while communicating ideas in a heightened form. In artistic terms, music increases the concentration of the audience on the performer. By guttering cosmic energy, music creates a channel of transition.

Music (dance) serves a vital function in human society to achieve social cohesion or togetherness, causing them to feel a deep sense of union with each other. As a result, people are liberated from the bonds of individuality. Making music together is always a social endeavour, inherently connected to forming and building social relationships and may therefore help patients to overcome social deficits ease. Making music is in itself motivating hence work well in those who otherwise have little or no motivation. Agu (2006) pointed out that "music is one of the strongest tools for cultural uniqueness and self identity in the life of any society" (p.18). This affirmation consequently situates music as a cohesive force for the unification of the different members of the various cultures co-existing in different urban centres. Onwuka (2010) asserted that:

Music is a collective kind of performance style in which people of different inclinations congregate in order to uphold common aspirations, beliefs and socio-cultural value systems during music events. Bound as one indivisible unit, the performing artistes and the committed spectators participate actively in the animated art of a traditional musical outing which calls for an integrated effort featuring accomplished instrumental playing, skilled dancing and a corresponding level of music appreciation. (p. 183)

The traditional music has magical and mystical values. It is used to secure an increase in fertility and good luck and to chase away evil influences and powers. In many such cases, music is related to masking which has formidable mystical qualities. Among the Igbo people, music helps in the management of pain of child birth. Women who want a natural child birth can use music to refocus

their attention instead of focusing on the pain. Many women also use music to reduce stress or get into comfortable zone during labour and delivery. Music is helpful for controlling breathing and maintaining a sense of calm.

Music also functions as a palliative in funeral ceremonies; dirges or funeral drumming act as therapeutic (palliative) measures “unconsciously” prescribed to the emotionally affected minds. In Igbo communities, when one dies, it is observed that brothers, sisters, neighbours and friends feel the loss together and come around to spend some sober moments with the bereaved, and as soon as a dirge is performed or heard, everyone is touched and the pains are together shared. According to Chukwu (1999), “the pains of death of an individual in a community in the traditional African life are communally shared through traditional music and dance, dance being an activity that cannot be divorced in the discussion of music in Africa” (p. 9).

In Igbo culture, music like *ufie* gives the elders or the title holders’ joy and it reduces stress because they take joy in dancing to the music. Collins (2001) explained that since most illnesses are caused by one form of stress or the other, it follows, therefore, that the removal of or lack of stress contributes to the achievement of the general well-being of the individuals in the society, which in turn effects directly to a more stable society, higher levels of productivity and longevity. Aesthetically, the beauty of the *ufie* music when performed has its influence on individuals, society and the ceremony in which it is performed. It uplifts the spirit and sets the correct mood for the ceremonies etc.



**Livinus Mgbike (Ozo-nwelibe of Nise) dancing Ufie Music**

Music sounds like *ufie* music makes the ozo initiated elders more lively or youthful. It elicits tremendous power on them. Looking at Ozo Livinus Mgbike’s picture (Ozo Nwelibe of Nise) above, one could ordinarily doubt the man’s ability to still walk without a walking stick not to talk of dancing so lively more than a youth can do. Music breathes new life into people. Basden (1921) discussing Igbo music remarked that the more one-listens to native (Igbo) music, the more one is conscious of its vital power. It touches the chords of man’s inmost being, and stirs his primal instincts. It demands the performer’s whole attention and so sways the individual as almost to divide asunder, for the time being, mind and body. It is intensively passionate, and no great effort of the imagination is required to realize that such music could only have originated with the son of Cain. Music has many effects on human health, physically, emotionally mentally, socially, aesthetically and spiritually.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

There are possibilities of achieving human healing through music. Music is a powerful tool for human healing. Igbo people believe that music is useful in human healing, that is why it is in use for such reasons. In different prayer houses, music is the paramount when casting out demons, praying for healing and other problems. Praying for mental –retarded is not done without music. Different illnesses are healed through music, high and low blood pressure; brain damage; trauma; depression; stress, anxiety; negative emotions mental disorder and stroke. The power of the sound of music can reduce the feeling of fatigue; increase the level of psychological arousal; physiological relaxation response; improvement in motor coordination; manages pain; improves mood and nobility; reduces the need for sedatives and pain relievers during and after surgery; decreases nausea during chemotherapy; and also helps patients participate in medical treatment that shortens hospital stays.

Therefore, serious awareness should be created in different institutions, markets, and churches of the power of music in healing. More hospitals should engage the services of music therapists to help their patients to experience fast healing through music. They should teach the pregnant women on how to use music to ease their pains especially when in labour. More people should undergo proper training for music therapists especially in Igbo culture. In the absence of specialized music therapists, music medicine should be employed as supplementary therapy by those who are not necessarily specialized music therapists. There should be formation of music psychotherapist guild which should incorporate as many musicians as possible who are going to be more engaged in human healing through music.

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