

## Introduction

This article focuses on the practice of Musical Hydrotherapy, the synergy created between art and wellness, and how it applies to working with people with profound disabilities. Musical Hydrotherapy is a practice pioneered by the charity Liquid Listening which I co-founded with Adele Drake, founder of Drake Music, in 2010. The practice generally involves the aquatic body work support (a variation of Watsu, a form of Aquatic Body Work) of a recipient floating on their back in a hydrotherapy pool as they listen to music played beneath the water surface.

The practice began as an extension of my Wet Sounds art project that transforms swimming pools into artistic experiences with light and sound above and below the water surface.

The two ways art manifests in our lives are by creating it or by encountering it,

## Creating art

The process of creating art has garnered considerable acknowledgment for its role in fostering wellbeing and positively affecting mental and emotional health. This journey of exploration, occasionally cathartic, and imbued with emotional or soulful expression, is facilitated by the production and presentation of artwork. It enhances focus, coordination, a sense of planning, and a feeling of achievement.

These are all positive steps towards developing self-esteem and improving wellness. The communication that is involved in art and craft making can help the artist deal with conflict and unresolved issues as well as opening a channel of communication with their surroundings. These are just some of the benefits of art-making that go towards enhancing one's wellbeing.

## The encounter with art

The encounter with good art does not by definition improve our health or wellbeing but the experience of good art or music can be a profound and nurturing encounter. It can launch one into an introspective reverie, it can excite and inspire ideas, and illuminate different perspectives on the person's perception of their world. The artistic encounter contributes to innovation in culture and helps forge our sense of social and personal identity.

Music has a strong association with wellness. Research shows how particular frequencies or chord progression, and even music from particular composers can enhance wellbeing, (a claim which I find too steeped in cultural biases to be universally true). However generally speaking,

*“Music impacts the brain by... reducing stress, pain and symptoms of depression as well as improving cognitive and motor skills, spatial-temporal learning and neurogenesis, which is the brain's ability to produce neurons.”*

(Pegasus, Magazine of the University of Central Florida, <https://www.ucf.edu/pegasus/your-brain-on-music/> accessed January 2024)

The music I create for Musical Hydrotherapy includes a variety of sound textures, not fixed by particular set rhythms or harmonies. It invites the listener to creatively engage with the music through stimulating the imagination. I also include sound that mimics the effect of brainwave frequencies, particularly Theta waves. Theta activity has a frequency of 3.5 to 7.5 Hz and is classed as “slow” activity. It is seen in connection with creativity, intuition, daydreaming, and is a repository for memories, emotions, sensations. These run in the background of the mix with the intention of subliminally entraining the listener’s brainwaves to this relaxed “slow” state.

I also curate a playlist made up of my own compositions and those of other musicians, selected for their creative merit and ability to create, guide and accompany the journey of relaxation and introspection, bringing the listener close to the transitional state between being awake and being asleep. This invites the listeners to relinquish the need to control the situation and allow for the water and the aquatic body work to do the rest.

## **Musical Hydrotherapy; spaces through sound and in water**

There is an overlap between spaces for art and spaces for healing. Perhaps it traces back to tribal societies where the shaman was the storyteller and the healer of the tribe. In art presentations, the environment determines the way the audience will approach it. Similarly, for a treatment to be effective, the recipient of the treatment has to be receptive and welcoming. The environment of the treatment is very much part of the remedial effect.

Our experience shows that unifying the space for art and the space for treatment through Musical Hydrotherapy in such a relaxed environment can have a very positive effect on the recipient’s wellbeing. This is based on research we conducted with The University of Roehampton in 2015 and on dozens of filmed and anecdotal testimonials from school staff.

Since 2010, we have been, delivering this artistic experience to children and staff in hydrotherapy pools at a number of special needs schools across the UK. The practice is carried out in a warm pool heated to 34c, with the standard white lights turned down. A trained staff member receives the child in the water, after being changed to swimwear in the changing room, and delivers a very calm 30-45min session in the water. Some children are more reluctant to be taken into a floating position straightaway but the music playing underwater offers an invitation to lie back and listen. Gradually, sometimes after several sessions, even the more agitated and reluctant children can experience calm and uncharacteristic relaxation that lasts throughout the day.

The staff member supporting the child is guided to ‘listen’ to the recipient. The practitioner develops a sensitivity to be able to follow their movement or lack of movement in the water with little intervention. The focus is on ‘being’ not ‘doing’. Liquid Listening’s aquatic bodywork trainer Steph Hodgson’s writes :

This is particularly relevant to the children with complex disabilities, particularly those with limited mobility outside the water, who much of Liquid Listening’s work focuses on. Often children arrive in the water “wheelchair-shaped” as well as full of tension. Being in the warm water in

a hydrotherapy pool is a huge release and freedom in itself for them, but the real impact happens when the child is “met” and held by the practitioner, the vibrations from the underwater sound travelling into their bodies. The practitioner feels the child’s nervous system letting go and entering a state of deep release, which in turn allows their bodies to release muscle spasms, release suppressed emotions, overwhelm or trauma, reduce agitation and enter a state of deep calm.

Underwater, listening becomes a personal inquisitive journey. Underwater, the directional sound, that gives us a sense of space above the water, disappears and collapses inwards. Sound is perceived through bone conduction, it is heard as if resounding from an inner voice. There is not a more personal and intimate experience of sound.

Floating buoyant in liquid evokes sub-conscious memories of our first 9 months of pre-natal existence, when sound and vibration were our first indication of something other than ourselves, when we were receptive and listening.

The hydrotherapy pool transforms into what only can be called as a sacred sensory space, a space for treatment as well as a space for the reception of art in the form of music. The success of the practice hangs on the great care taken to maintain and hold the space as such.

## **Impact**

It is difficult to obtain direct feedback from most of the children we work with due to their limited ability to express themselves verbally, so it is not clear what their impression is of the music or the support they receive. Nearly all of them relax and their behaviour transforms during their session. The teachers, who know them well, remark on the changes they witness and note that they have found the experience to increase the pupil’s self-regulation.

The impact is also noticeable among the teachers trained in Musical Hydrotherapy who attune to the pupils they are working with. Within many learning environments, the space to interact and simply spend quality time with pupils is missing. Some teachers who experienced Musical Hydrotherapy commented on how they felt they were taken on a journey, others found it incredibly emotional and were deeply touched by it. They were also touched by the, at times immediate, effect they see on the children’s behaviour and their abilities to self-regulate.

## **Conclusion**

Just as a well-designed environment can enhance the reception of art, creating a conducive space for treatment can maximize its effectiveness. By optimizing the surroundings to promote comfort, tranquility, and accessibility, individuals undergoing treatment can better engage with the process, leading to improved outcomes and overall well-being. Incorporating elements of artistic expression, and sound in particular, into treatment spaces not only enriches the sensory experience but also cultivates an

atmosphere conducive to relaxation, introspection, and emotional expression. As a result, individuals undergoing treatment are better positioned to connect with their inner selves, engage more deeply with the healing process, and ultimately achieve more favorable outcomes.

**Bio**

Joel Cahen is a sound designer, composer and curator. He is also the co-founder and artistic director of the charity Liquid Listening. His award winning, internationally acclaimed project Wet Sounds has transformed swimming pools worldwide into art space. More on his work on [www.newtoy.org](http://www.newtoy.org)

Pegasus (no date) Accessed from: <http://tinyurl.com/2wvevmgs>. Accessed 09/02/2024