

# Not just Vera Lynn songs - how to make the most of music

**Mike Phillips**, associate consultant trainer at social care consultancy Meaningful Care Matters, takes a lively look at the considerable benefits of incorporating music into dementia care

If music be the food of love, play on. So wrote William Shakespeare in *Twelfth Night*. Many of us are aware that love is at the heart of Tom Kitwood's 'flower model' of caring for, and supporting people with, dementia. This article will reflect on how music in dementia care can not only meet the psychological needs from Kitwood's model but also how music brings many other potential benefits, including for staff.

Let us start by trying the following.

- Hum the theme tune to *Coronation Street*.
- Name a piece of music that was played on your wedding day or a song that reminds you of a loved one.
- Do the moves to *YMCA* by Village People.
- Complete the following: 'Hickory, dickory dock...'
- Think of a song or piece of music that makes you feel happy. Now one that makes you feel sad.

- Sing *All Things Bright and Beautiful* silently.
- Think of a piece of music that reminds you of your homeland or culture, especially if you were born outside the UK.
- If you have seen the film *Jaws*, recall the opening bars of music and how it made you feel.

I am sure you were able to do most, if not all, the above. That is because music stimulates your brain.

## Music and the brain

The incredible thing about music is that it uses different lobes, or parts, of your brain. As a trainer, when I undertook my professional training, I specialised in 'brain-friendly' learning - also known as accelerated learning - for my exam. The topic fascinated me as I learned that music could aid focus and concentration, and that a certain beat

per minute could help us stay calm and focused. This is called the Mozart effect.

Different types of music can create an emotional state in learners - excited, happiness, thoughtful and quiet. If we connect music (auditory) with the body (kinaesthetic), these two memory channels can help us remember things more effectively - this explains why you could probably do the movements to *YMCA*.

We are introduced to music and rhythm in the womb via our mothers' heartbeat and perhaps humming of lullabies. Here starts our connection to music and rhythm - my one year-old great niece Isla is already moving to music. Isla may not be saying words yet but if I sing "Wah! Wah! Wah!" she repeats it back perfectly.

This continues as children develop into teenagers. We learn nursery rhymes; we listen to folk tunes. Even at the end of life,



I have seen people with dementia tap their finger or toes to music.

### It's not just Vera Lynn songs!

I have nothing against Vera Lynn, indeed, she was born not very far from where I live. However, I feel an internal scream whenever I walk into care settings playing her songs. There is obviously some value in playing old tunes but for many people with dementia they will have been born towards the end of the war, especially those with young-onset dementia.

As NHS England's national clinical director for dementia Alistair Burns says, 'having indiscriminately piped music in the background of, say, a care home would not be appropriate.'<sup>1</sup>

Our choice of music, therefore, needs to be much more nuanced and, wherever possible, personalised for each person based on their likes/dislikes and life history. As Burns notes, there is 'evidence that retaining memory for music enjoyed between the ages of ten and 30 is much more enduring'. Rekindling these can have a beneficial effect.

### The soundtrack of our lives

We can all think of music which rekindles memories from our lives: songs sung at school, hymns, our first kiss, our wedding day, funerals of loved ones and so on. Purple Angels is a project set up by Norman MacNamara, who lives with dementia. It provides free MP3 players for people with dementia in care homes, hospitals and the community, with personalised playlists selected by their carer.

When my friend Marilyn's husband, David, went into a care home with Parkinson's-related dementia during Covid, we discussed how isolated David was. Marilyn sent me the playlist and it was beautiful to hear the emotional touchstones through her and David's life together.

Marilyn told me: "I would never have thought of this calming accessory without the kind intervention of Norm. Selecting the music was therapy itself for me, especially as there were months when David and I couldn't see each other.

"He recently began suffering from bouts of agitation in which he became distressed

and violent and on one occasion when I knew he would be heavily sedated, I begged them to give him the MP3 player instead and, miraculously, it calmed him immediately."

### The power of music in dementia care

Working with Pam Schweitzer and her reminiscence project 'Remembering Yesterday, Caring Today' years ago, I was struck by a gentleman who could not name the year he married until his wife reminded him. Nevertheless, when we came to the singalong section of the session, he managed to sing every word to *Get Me to the Church on Time* from *My Fair Lady*.

This article is primarily about music, yet there are so many opportunities to connect with people living with dementia through sound and rhythm more broadly. I remember a former actress called Gwen, who sat in on one of my training sessions I was delivering in a care home.

I was using a sound effects quiz to demonstrate our auditory semantic memory. I inadvertently played a sound effect of donkeys. Gwen said suddenly: "The donkeys used to come to the gate of our garden – I remember them and giving them carrots." We were all awestruck at this simple demonstration of how the auditory cortex works.

Later, when Gwen heard the sound effect of a train leaving a station, she said poignantly: "Mother used to take us on the train to the seaside after father died to help cheer us up." We were all left in tears, touched by her feelings, and connecting with her memories that had been triggered through a simple sound.

### How to use music in dementia care

Participating in music can be a passive, yet enjoyable, experience that boosts wellbeing, e.g. listening to music on the radio, CD or a live performance. This does not mean, however, having the playing hard house music! Fantastic projects like M4DRadio play online music that is tailored to, and appropriate for, people living with dementia to rekindle memories.

There also many musicians, entertainers and choirs that are willing to visit care settings to provide entertainment. Other projects include Live Music Now, Music for



Tom Kitwood's 'flower model' of caring for, and supporting people with, dementia

Dementia, Intergenerational Music Making, Songhaven and HealthPitch. Meanwhile, there can be many active ways of engaging and participating in music, such as playing instruments, home-grown shows, singalongs, visiting musicians, musical quizzes and more.

### Spontaneous music, singing and sound-making

In his book, *Connecting through Music with People with Dementia: A Guide for Caregivers*, Robin Rio says by using 'music to provide comfort and meaningful experience' we can 'develop a sense of comfort with making sounds and singing, playing rhythms on percussion, and using recorded music effectively.'

Many of us will have worked with people with dementia during personal care and/or times of emotional distress, e.g. 'I want to go home to my Mum'. Such situations can be difficult for staff. This is where music is a useful tool to change mood. Playing calm, relaxing music during personal care may help relieve feelings of anxiety for the person with dementia. Additionally, we can hum or sing songs that are familiar to the person, such as lullabies, church music or other familiar songs.

Rio says the sound of a 'live' voice is preferable over a recording and that staff does not need to be perfect singers or musicians. 'It is the caregiver who needs to become desensitized to any anxieties or embarrassment associated with singing or making musical noises', he notes.

### Benefits of using music for dementia care organisations

There is growing research evidence that music can benefit the symptoms of

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dementia and other symptoms of older age. Music has a unique power to improve physical, emotional, and social wellbeing.

As evidence for the benefits of using music in dementia care increases, this is reflected in the fact that it is recognised in NICE's Dementia Guidelines, and for those living in the community, music can be used through 'social prescribing'.<sup>2</sup> Staff report feeling more confident and motivated, and that music can help deepen their relationship with people with dementia and their family carers.

A working paper from 'A Choir in Every Care Home' also demonstrates how music can help in meeting Care Quality Commission assessment criteria.<sup>3</sup> Their website also provides a range of resources, including research findings.

### Music has power even in the later stages of dementia

*Alive Inside* is a film that poignantly demonstrates how memories and feelings can be awakened for people with dementia through the power of music even in later stages of the disease. This groundbreaking film of Naomi Feil using music and validation techniques with Gladys - a woman with late-stage dementia - is not only emotional; it demonstrates how the use of singing personalised gospel music, rhythm, movement and recalling the power of appropriate touch can reawaken Gladys and create an emotional connection - making communication possible.

A search on YouTube provides examples of how music can benefit those with late-stage dementia with non-verbal communication skills, as Huguette is brought alive through listening and singing to French songs, relieving her

feelings of distress.<sup>4</sup>

Many will have seen the emotional clip of a ballerina with Alzheimer's Disease listening to Swan Lake while sitting in her wheelchair. The music stimulates her 'muscle memory' - acutely developed in dancers - from her having performed the piece.<sup>5</sup> Also, Tony Bennett, despite having dementia, recently performed with Lady Gaga.

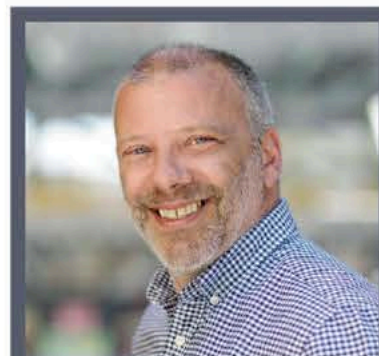
Music has a remarkable restorative power, as shown by Paul Harvey, who despite his dementia, can still compose music and has achieved a lifetime ambition of conducting the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra. As Paul said: "Everything is possible - even if you have dementia." The overwhelming lesson from these films are that whilst many assume that the person with dementia is 'lost' as their dementia progresses, we can still actually reach the person and connect with them on an emotional level. That is the magic of music.

There are a plethora of projects, initiatives and organisations that are driving forward the power of music in dementia and older people's care. National Activity Providers Association produces a range of resources and services to promote music and activity, including the useful *Getting Creative with Tech* guide. Other projects to highlight include: Arts in Care Homes, Music for Life, Playlist for Life and Dancing.

This article has attempted to introduce you to the benefits of music in dementia. However, it is a vast topic. There are so many great projects I have not included here. However, I would love to hear about your experiences about the power of music in dementia care, so please get in contact at [mike@meaningfulcarematters.com](mailto:mike@meaningfulcarematters.com). ■

### References

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### Mike Phillips

Mike Phillips is an associate consultant trainer at Meaningful Care Matters, which specialises in helping health and social care providers to access a variety of support services. Mike's passion for working with older people started when he was three months old when he first visited a care home where his grandmother was 'Matron'. By age six, he was 'Chief Entertainments Officer and Activities Co-ordinator', giving a concert every morning after breakfast for residents - whether they listened or not. After several roles, including senior management, Mike became a freelance trainer, facilitator, consultant and coach. He is delighted to be part of the team at Meaningful Care Matters, where his passions for learning/training and dementia care combine. Mike's training style is based on 'brain-friendly learning theory' sessions designed to interactive, inspiring and fun.

### Things to try and think about

- What thoughts/memories/feelings were triggered by this article?
- Grab a cuppa with your colleagues and explore ideas for using music and rhythm on a one-to-one basis - e.g. during personal care - or when people with dementia are anxious or distressed.
- Choose four people with dementia in your care setting. Research their life history - involving their relatives/friends - and create a personalised playlist for each of them.
- How could you use music more effectively in group settings?
- Think about your care planning processes. How could you find out more about the music preferences of the people you care for?
- How could you involve family carers in finding out more about musical preferences of people with dementia in your care?
- In what ways could you use music as part of creative a positive mealtime experience?