

**The Importance of Music in Difficult Times**

Jadyn S. Peterson

Helena College University of Montana

WRIT 101: College Writing

Karen L. Henderson

May 2, 2021

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSIC

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In March 2020, people worldwide were faced with a raging pandemic, mass confusion, and isolation even amongst families. Reunions, parties, schools, and other activities that most people found collective solace in, were all cancelled. As a result, many have scrambled to find other such supports to help them endure great loneliness, sorrow, and everything that has come with the pandemic. One of these things that has been a considerable support for people during the pandemic is music. Music is important in times like these because it brings people together and because of its healing power.

During the Siege of Leningrad, on August 9, 1942, Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> symphony premiered. Musicians who were on the front lines fighting were pulled back and gathered with old and rotting instruments in the Philharmonic Hall to play a piece of music so powerful that it would help the citizens of Leningrad survive another 536 days against the Germans. The music wasn't political; it was written by someone who hated Russia as much as he loved it. Rather, the music was "dedicated to the people of Leningrad" who would live through horrors unimaginable by today's society (as quoted in Anderson, 2015, p. 5). Three of the musicians died before they played the symphony whole. Still, the symphony premiered in a spectacular performance which was broadcasted across the lines to the Germans and would be played over 60 times in the states after the premiere in America. Similarly, in 1912, as the famed *Titanic* sank in the Atlantic Ocean, a group of musicians led by Wallace Hartley played into the night. Every player decided to not abandon the ship and they played up until they drowned, where "only the engulfing ocean had power to drown them into silence" (as quoted in Levi, 2016). Music helped the starving soldiers and the dying musicians survive. Music "contributed to a strong motivation to survive on the brink of death" and brought together people of every creed, race, religion, people from

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opposite ends of the world who would drown in the same waters or enemies who would fight for the same city, because “in the end it was composed for humanity” (Polikarpov et al., 2017, p. 105; Caffrey, 2016).

Music is essential in tumultuous times because it brings people together. In times of great division, during war or civil unrest, or on the brink of death, music promotes camaraderie. Many sources have reported that people feel more connected to each other when listening to calming music. Museum curator, Julian Zugazagoitia (2020), writes that “the arts can truly bring us together by fostering a shared meditative experience, bridging the divides that separate us, and uniting us even when we cannot be together” (p. 335). This sense of community and togetherness is essential when people are stuck at home, quarantined, and craving social interaction. Similarly, Dr. Christianne Rushton (2020), director of the school of music at Acadia University in Wolfville expresses that “music is an inherently social undertaking, and we build communities by making music together. Not having the opportunity to breathe together and play or sing together is a great loss” and goes on to say that “this is our opportunity to provide connection in a very disconnected world” (as quoted in Duke, 2020). Already, musicians from groups as small as the Helena Symphony to the great Royal Philharmonic Orchestra have decided to livestream concerts that would normally be in person. Nearly all of these performances can be watched for free. Over quarantine, cello soloist Yo-Yo Ma started *songs of comfort*, a single video of himself playing calming songs for his viewers that now is a hashtag on YouTube with over three and a half thousand videos. Similarly, a music group called *The Longest Johns* recently published a video of themselves singing a sea shanty with over six thousand other singers online. Also, nurses and doctors worldwide have posted videos of themselves singing the same songs, dancing to the latest top hits, and connecting over something as minor as music. Communities have also

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found ways to show their support for healthcare workers and first responders, singing uplifting songs from their balconies and porches, or, like in Missoula, howling at a certain time. Like the citizens of Leningrad or the passengers of the *Titanic*, music can be the force that helps to bring broken people back together.

Another reason why music is important in difficult times is that it brings a multitude of health benefits. In fact, music has been utilized by health professionals as therapy for both physical and mental illnesses. In a study on the connection between art and health, Stuckey and Nobel (2010) found that “music can calm neural activity in the brain, which may lead to reductions in anxiety, and that it may help to restore effective functioning in the immune system” (p.255). Another study wrote that “music and art are two interventions that may have a positive effect on psychological states” and found that cortisol levels were significantly lower in patients after participating in music and art therapy (Kaimal et al., 2016, pp. 74, 76). Music therapy and group music activities have further proved to be effective means of promoting mental health and can even improve levels of depression and anxiety (Clements-Cortés & Pascoe, 2020, p. 61; “Music Therapy,” 2011). Today, while more than 80% of American adults report prolonged stress emotions, music therapy and musical activities are needed more than ever (American Psychological Association, 2021). Researcher Joanne Loewy even goes so far as to say that “music very much has a way of enhancing quality of life and can, in addition, promote recovery” (as quoted in Novotney, 2013). Sick and anxious people have found consolation, community, and peace in shared musical experiences such as these.

Politics have the world divided. The pandemic has threatened the normalcy of life. Hope is at an all-time low. Still, people will hold on, because music has not been killed. Music can bring people together, and it can heal sick minds and weary bodies. Music can be the victory that

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Shostakovich thought of when he said, “my idea of victory isn’t something brutal; it’s better explained as the victory of light over darkness, of humanity over barbarism, of reason over reaction” (as quoted in Farrell, 2019). Music is important in difficult times and needs to be recognized as such.

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