

spirit ~ HEALING



SINGING TO HEAL

MUSIC CAN BE A POWERFUL HEALING TOOL, WHEN USED IN THE RIGHT WAY AND IN THE RIGHT DOSE. RAJAM SHANKER, A MUSIC THERAPIST, USES SELECT RAGAS FOR HEALING AUTISTIC CHILDREN, WITH DRAMATIC RESULTS

by Dr G Uma

When Tansen sang raga Megh Malhaar the rains descended, when he sang raga Deepak lamps burst into light, and sometimes wild animals would come and sit at his feet. These are the stories we have all grown up on, but miracles stranger than these are commonplace in the life of Rajam Shanker. These miracles include life-changing events in the lives of autistic children and their parents. Though relatively young in the field of therapy, she has seen a significant impact of her therapy on her patients. Her mastery in music and spiritual practices like chanting and meditation are useful tools with which to sense a person's aura. She also has an uncanny ability of sensing the raga with which a person resonates. For instance, I discovered that I resonate with the raga Revati and she, with Vasanta.

Music has always been used for meditation, stress relief and so on. Music, in fact, is a part of our celebrations and sadness. But in Rajam's hands ragas have been a source of therapeutic healing, not just for autistic and hyperactive children, but for those experiencing menopause, thyroid problems and suicidal depression. Through her careful ministrations and usage of the particular raga that resonates with the patient, she has brought about remarkable healing. A nonverbal autistic boy named Pranav is now an able singer and communicates freely after two years of her therapy.

Rajam Shanker's training in classical music started at an early age and continued after marriage. "I resumed training after my kids started full-time school. My husband and children, now married, have always been supportive. My students range from the age group of five to 50. I am a patient teacher and ensure that they get the basics right, even if it takes weeks to do so." She also functions as an examiner for students of music, and is particular about discipline and grading, never compromising on quality. Rajam Shanker has a bachelor's degree in Carnatic music and

Sangeet Visharad from Akhil Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya.

I first met Rajam when my daughter started taking music lessons from her. Later, I also joined her class. Three years ago, on my daughter's insistence, I sought her help for handling menopausal depression, and experienced great relief.

Excerpts from the interview:

What is your system of music therapy?

The benefits of this therapy cannot be obtained through reproducing the sound from a CD/cassette player. Here we send the energy of the vibration through our singing in a particular style. I use the cassettes only to help the mother or any other family member learn the singing, so that it can be given to the child. You don't have to be a great singer to do this. You may use lyrics or just hum the tune. But you have to make sure you are sending the vibration. Some basic knowledge of music may be an advantage but it is definitely not a pre-requisite.

How many sessions are required to see some benefits?

Sometimes the effects are instantaneous like the time a hyperactive child simply came and slept in my lap when I sang a particular raga. However, one must have patience and perseverance to see long-lasting effects. It is like medicine. The child needs to be given the exact dose in the frequency that is prescribed. You may sing the same small tune for several weeks, thrice a day for five minutes each time. When it has had its effect, you move onto the next medicine, the next raga for the next level of development (see box). When the family, especially the mother, has been persevering and regular, I have seen dramatic improvement in just a couple of months.

What role does music play in our life?

Music is essentially based on faith in the Almighty. Not only humans, all living beings attain peace through music. Different ragas give rise to different moods or raga rasas. Many ragas on which folk music is based, are meant to

unleash our emotions, and facilitate an appropriate response. There is music for every occasion and season in life – from birth to death, for seasonal changes and time variations in a day. Musical notes are connected to the five elements, to the planets, and to the seven chakras in our body.

When and how did you start music therapy?

My first tryst with music therapy occurred when my guru, Sri Kollegal Subrahmaniam (fondly called Mama by his students), sang the Kalyani raga during my daughter Hamsini's seemantham or godbharaai (the celebration for a pregnant woman generally held in the seventh month of pregnancy) in 2000. I wondered why he had picked this particular raga. When I asked him, he said that ragas have a soothing beneficial effect on the mind and body. With his help, I started researching the subject and found a wealth of information on the therapeutic effects of music.

I started using music in therapy as a small experiment in September 2004 with 12-15 autistic children at the Sandipani wing of Little Hearts Hospital at Hyderabad. I teamed up with a colleague and a medical and paramedical group to see the effects of Indian classical music on these children. To start with, the children simply ran around in excitement but gradually they began to calm down and pay attention. At the end of one month, the doctors said that the children were more peaceful. I remember the look on the parents' faces; they were simply thrilled. This validated our belief and was the beginning of a long journey on this path.

How do you pick a particular raga?

I first study the case history of the autistic child, and then spend a couple of hours with the child. After that, I try out different ragas, see the response, and then zero in on the right one. Even small details like the child's behaviour at a par-

Music therapy and autism

The use of music therapy in autism can be divided into three stages: detoxification, awakening of cells, and strengthening of cells.

In about eight to nine weeks, the child calms down, is less hyperactive, less irritable and accepts the therapy willingly. By about 12 weeks, he /she begins to participate in the therapy. This is the end of the detoxification stage.

The duration of second stage depends on the age of the child, and the regularity of therapy – from seven to 12 months. This period of awakening can be noticed when the child starts trying out his vocal chords. The child may show some perceptible signs of positive response, like smiling, lis-

tening and following given instructions. Appetite improves and overall, the child is happy.

There are visible changes in the third stage. The child uses his vocal chords, may start humming, makes eye contact, and even speaks in sentences. He is comfortable in his environment, and accepts other children. There is a marked improvement in the sense of balance and co-ordination of thought and speech. This is a period of self-healing without much support from the therapist.

Every child is unique, however, with variations in the degree of healing according to the age and severity of symptoms.

ticular time of the day, his favourite food and colour, help us in identifying the particular requirement. There are some basic ragas to cleanse, like Malahari, others have other benefits.

Pranav, a non-verbal autistic child, was nine when he came into therapy. Today, two years into therapy, he sings continuously for 45 minutes and communicates with everyone around. My late father, an expert in astrology, taught me about strong and weak planets and their effects at the time of birth. This knowledge combined with birth details of the child helps me to identify the suitable raga for a particular child.

Can music therapy be used for other conditions?

Menopause brings a host of hormonal imbalances in a woman's body. Since the symptoms are so varied ranging from excess bleeding to depression, the same raga cannot be used for everyone. Based

on her symptoms, I try out certain ragas for a few weeks and see the effect. If needed, I change it. As opposed to the traditional singing styles, in music therapy you have to sing at a low pitch, and attune to the sound vibration.

When I first met Naina, a scientist, she was going through menopause. A picture of severe depression, irritability and anger, she had made life unbearable for herself and her family. However, three months of music therapy brought about a miraculous change, and she was back to her smiling cheerful self, much to the relief of her family members. I also treat patients with thyroid problems and those with suicidal tendencies, and doctors have been happy with the results of my work with such patients.

What other types of music therapy is practised?

I am still exploring and networking with like-minded people. I am not sure

if this type of individualised therapy is being done elsewhere because this is very intensive, requiring the therapist's time and energy. Western countries use instrumental music (particularly stringed instruments like cello). Most often, groups of people are given music therapy of a general nature. These days the market is flooded with music albums for every malady from pain relief to overcoming exam fear! They do bring a sense of calm, but I would say are more like over the counter drugs, which do not treat the root cause. Just as a deep-seated disease needs a skilled doctor, so also this. I prescribe a precise dose of swaras after a complete analysis of the personality of the patient and his ailment. The treatment is monitored by both medical and voluntary parent groups.

Right now, I am unable to reach many people. However, I am willing to train those who are interested, particularly if they have had some music training earlier. People who want to become music therapists should not look for personal excellence in music – in terms of the number of ragas they can sing or how best they can express themselves. Therapy involves singing the same raga for weeks together.

Currently, all her energies are directed towards the therapy sessions she conducts apart from Bangalore, in places like Chennai and Hyderabad. She is happy that she has been an instrument of healing people with various ailments and is currently working on a doctorate in the field. Rajam is part of the autism.india.yahogroups – a 3000-member strong mailing list and is a regular therapist at Sandipani.

Based at Hyderabad, Dr G Uma is Programme Manager at Bodtree Consulting. She works for faculty development through Inspiring Teachers (www.inspiring-teachers.com), and for disabled persons through Samrita Trust and Helping People Society.
e-mail: guma@inspiring-teachers.com.
Contact Rajam Shanker at: rajams@yahoo.com.
Mobile: 098490 28014 Landline: 040-2711 1991.
We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article.
Mail us at editor@lifepositive.net

Courtesy Sangeeta Kalpa Dhrama by Dr. Harikesanallur Muthaiah Bhagavathar

