Growing Field of Music Therapy Attracting More Students at UD

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GROWING FIELD OF MUSIC THERAPY
ATTRACTING MORE STUDENTS AT UD

DAYTON, Ohio — “Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak.”

And, perhaps, to soothe the body and mind?

When he penned those now famous words in 1697 for his only tragedy, The Mourning Bride, playwright William Congreve could not have known the extent to which the therapeutic potential of music would be scientifically explored three centuries later.

Since its formal organization as a professional career in 1950, music therapy has unceasingly continued to produce measurable results to support music’s healing powers. And after 50 years, music therapy continues to grow steadily in professional membership, especially as the interest in holistic and alternative therapies continues to grow as well.

At the University of Dayton, enrollment in the music therapy program has jumped fourfold from the first class of about 10 in 1974 to today’s enrollment of nearly 40 students.

“Music therapy has grown tremendously as an occupation in the last decade, and yet UD is one of only three colleges in Ohio to offer an undergraduate degree program,” said degree coordinator Susan Gardstrom, a board-certified music therapist and assistant professor of music at the University.

Mothers have long known that a soft song can calm a distressed child. The study of music therapy seeks to explore, explain and exploit the phenomenon behind that influence therapeutically, using music to restore, maintain and improve mental, physical and spiritual health.

“People have been using music in a healing capacity since the beginning of time, really,” Gardstrom said. “In the late 19th century, for example, Freud, Jung and their ilk were using music to expose unconscious conflict.

“But it wasn’t until just after World War II that the transformative powers of music were documented and applied as a therapy in the United States. Musicians in VA hospitals

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began to discover that, when exposed to music, patients seemed less anxious and needed less medication. So the practice of music therapy, as it's used today, started with people who combined their music skills and talents with their desire to help others."

In 1950, the National Association for Music Therapy — now called the American Music Therapy Association — was founded with 22 people attending its first meeting. Today, membership is more than 4,000.

"There was a big spurt of growth in music therapy programs offered in higher education in the early- to mid-70s," Gardstrom said.

The music therapy program at UD involves participation in a University-sponsored music therapy club and volunteer field work for first-year students, followed by structured practical experiences in a nursing care center, a psychiatric unit and two sites of the student’s choosing in the following three years of study.

Students learn to address the physical, psychological, cognitive and social needs of their clients — who run the gamut from infants to the elderly — by encouraging them to play instruments, sing, move to or simply listen to music.

"Music touches people in so many ways," said Gardstrom, whose interests include the effect of music exposure and criminal behavior involving juvenile offenders. "It has so much value in opening up issues of humanity, and it does so in a non-threatening way so we can enjoy ourselves while learning, growing and healing."

Gardstrom said career opportunities for music therapy grads are as varied as the clientele, who include premature infants, survivors of domestic violence, individuals with Alzheimer’s disease or developmental disabilities, patients in physical therapy programs and many others.

Ann Trame, a 1998 UD grad and activities director/music therapist at Catalpa Health and Rehabilitation Center in Harrison Township, was majoring in math and computer science for secondary education when friends told her about the music therapy program at the University. "I switched majors the next day, and it was the best decision I ever made — I haven’t regretted it since," Trame said.

Explaining that music therapy has proved particularly effective with Alzheimer’s patients and others who are cognitively impaired, Trame said one woman refused to provide any information about her medical condition with health care professionals at the center. After developing a rapport with Trame through music, however, the woman felt comfortable enough to share important information about herself.

"Overall, I’ve seen an increase in positive mood, self esteem, socialization skills, participation in activities and alertness in the residents," Trame said.

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UD senior Beth Huss, who will receive her undergraduate degree in music therapy in the fall, recently presented a paper on the varying effects of music therapy on anxiety levels of women in crisis at an AMTA regional conference in Kalamazoo, Mich.

Huss conducted several months of research at the YWCA Dayton domestic violence shelter as part of her honors/scholars program studies at UD. She said her work at the shelter not only reinforced her academic studies, but her decision to switch from a major in math to music therapy.

"It really gave me a passion for women's issues, such as domestic violence and homelessness, and inspired me to look more into social work as an outlet for music therapy," Huss said.

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