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**What happens if algorithmic music meets medicine**

## Necrologio

**Pietro Alberto Bertazzi (1945-2021)**

L'Istituto di Medicina del Lavoro  
dell'Università degli Studi e dell'Azienda  
Ospedaliera di Perugia dalle origini ai nostri giorni

a cura di  
Giuseppe Abbritti

con la collaborazione di  
Giacomo Muzi, Adolfo Puxeddu  
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“Memoria minuitur nisi exerceatur” e bene ha fatto Giuseppe Abbritti ad esercitare la sua memoria e quella dei suoi Collaboratori in veste scritta per ricordare la nascita e la vita matura, tuttora rigogliosa, della Medicina del Lavoro a Perugia. E l’ha fatto con sagacia ed intelligenza, non confidando soltanto nella memoria dei singoli individui, ma, con metodo scientifico accurato, riproponendo documenti illustrativi e coinvolgendo un po’ tutti coloro che hanno contribuito alla fondazione e alle tappe successive della cattedra e della disciplina della nostra Università. Il quadro risultante è così ad un tempo completo e piacevole perché ogni persona coinvolta ha portato la sua visione e l’aspetto, piccolo o grande, che ha contribuito a creare.

dalla prefazione del Prof. Fausto Grignani

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# GIORNALE ITALIANO DI MEDICINA DEL LAVORO ED ERGONOMIA

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## What happens if algorithmic music meets medicine

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**ABSTRACT.** *Since ancient times there has been recognition of music's therapeutic powers, inherent in the properties of sound and its effects on human beings at a psychophysical level. Literature showed the development of therapeutic applications of music in numerous clinical settings. Music-listening itself can qualify as an effective therapeutic means within clinical contexts. Numerous studies document the potentialities of this practice. Whilst, it appears to be difficult to study the phenomenon of music from a scientific point of view, it may be possible to attempt moving music closer to science. Algorithms are of help in this process. Only recently has algorithmic music been used within the context of composing music with therapeutic aims helping to create songs for precise therapeutic aims: music characteristics can be altered and re-modelled and, above all, simplified. It was exactly this intent that recently brought into being an algorithm, Melomics-Health, which composes music with a "therapeutic" logic. Melomics-Health allows us to study the effect of specific musical parameters and structures on individuals (including neuro-scientific aspects) with the possibility to correlate effectiveness and efficiency to those precise musical aspects and to re-model the latter based on these findings. The use of algorithms applied to music as therapy constitutes a new starting point, an attempt to bring art and science closer together, to increase awareness and effectiveness in the use of music in therapeutic contexts; a new perspective integrating art, science and technology in the service of medicine, in clinical work and research.*

**Key words:** *algorithmic music, music therapy, music medicine, music listening, evidence-based approaches.*

**RIASSUNTO.** *Fin dall'antichità sono stati riconosciuti i poteri terapeutici della musica, riguardati le proprietà del suono e i suoi effetti sugli esseri umani a livello psicofisico. La letteratura ha mostrato lo sviluppo di applicazioni terapeutiche della musica in numerosi contesti clinici. Lo stesso ascolto musicale può qualificarsi come un mezzo terapeutico efficace in contesti clinici. Numerosi studi documentano le potenzialità di questa pratica. Anche se sembra difficile studiare il fenomeno della musica da un punto di vista scientifico, è possibile tentare di avvicinare la musica alla scienza. Gli algoritmi possono supportare questo intento. Solo recentemente la musica algoritmica è stata utilizzata nell'ambito della composizione di musica con scopi terapeutici aiutando a creare brani con precisi scopi terapeutici: le caratteristiche della musica possono essere variate e modellate e, soprattutto, semplificate. È stato proprio questo l'intento che ha portato recentemente alla nascita di un algoritmo, Melomics-Health, che compone musica con una logica "terapeutica". Melomics-Health permette di studiare l'effetto di specifici parametri e strutture musicali sugli individui (anche a livello neuroscientifico) con la possibilità di*

### What happens if algorithmic music meets medicine

Since ancient times there has been recognition of music's therapeutic powers, inherent in the properties of sound and its effects on human beings at a psychophysical level (Thaut, 2015; Lippi et al., 2010). Ancient peoples and modern sciences have been concerned with, and continue to investigate, the therapeutic effects of music, which, in more recent times, has given rise to music therapy. This discipline has moved through diverse phases, from an almost magical employment of music to contemporary studies which have benefitted from the contributions, first of the biomedical sciences and subsequently of the neurosciences. A mere review of literature in databases such as PubMed suffices to illustrate the development of therapeutic applications of music in numerous clinical settings (Aalbers et al., 2017; Garza-Villarreal et al., 2017; Geretsegger et al., 2017; Sihvonen et al., 2017; Bradt et al., 2016; Hole et al., 2015; Geretsegger et al., 2014). Music's therapeutic applications bring to our attention, with ever-increasing urgency, the need to conciliate science's rigor with music's implicit evanescence and subjectivity.

The latter is as complex a phenomenon as it is powerful, difficult to study and to define in relation to possible therapeutic outcomes. Literature offers a wide panorama of potential interventions with music (Raglio et al., 2015): In the first instance, music therapy's traditions and culture highlighted how music, to have therapeutic efficacy, must be implemented in a relational context (Raglio, 2011). The dual term sound-relation constituted an essential prerequisite for the consideration of the intervention as being potentially therapeutic. More recently, however, the idea has emerged that even music-listening itself can qualify as an effective therapeutic means within clinical contexts. Numerous studies document the potentialities of this practice (Hole et al., 2015; Sarkamo et al., 2008; Gerdner, 2000). Apart from issues regarding methodology and approach, the aspect of the proposed contents of music-listening proves particularly significant. This has inspired researchers to investigate this element, resulting in the conclusion that it is individualized listening that produces the best therapeutic results, in other words, listening which is attributable to the patient's subjective experience, to his/her personal tastes, and to music which pleases.



documentare la loro efficacia con la possibilità di modellarli sulla base dei risultati ottenuti. L'uso di algoritmi applicati alla musica come terapia costituisce un nuovo punto di partenza, un tentativo di avvicinare arte e scienza, al fine di aumentare la consapevolezza e l'efficacia nell'uso della musica in contesti terapeutici; una nuova prospettiva che integra arte, scienza e tecnologia al servizio della medicina, nel lavoro clinico e nella ricerca.

**Parole chiave:** musica algoritmica, musicoterapia, music medicine, ascolto musicale, approcci evidence-based.

It is undeniable that such music produces effects at a general level and important changes at a physical and biochemical level (Chanda et al., 2013). The prolonging of these effects can determine psycho-behavioral changes in individuals and can also reduce transitory symptoms (such as anxiety or stress due to a particular event, for example before an operation or in relation to pain).

In other approaches based on music-listening, it is the researchers who select the music to propose; in this case, complications arise in the effort to identify music repertoire corresponding to therapeutic aims. One of the crucial questions is therefore the extent to which the subjective factor of the suggested repertoire should be considered, or, rather, the extent to which the musical parameters and structures are responsible for any therapeutic effects. This article is concerned with precisely this investigation.

Whilst it appears to be difficult to study the phenomenon of music from a scientific point of view, it may be possible to attempt moving music closer to science. Algorithms are of help in this process. Experiences leading to the creation of music using artificial intelligence are not new to us (Ball, 2012; Cope, 2005). The numerous examples available of works composed by artificial intelligence indicate diverse musical genres, indeed introducing stylistic innovations and original works, each with its own aesthetic quality and identity. One important example is the recording made by the London Symphony Orchestra, which has immortalized a repertoire of contemporary music created entirely by an artificial intelligence named Iamus (CD Melomics Records, S.L., 2012) (Ball, 2012).

However, only recently has algorithmic music been used within the context of composing music with therapeutic aims, offering interesting advantages and prospects (Raglio et al., 2017). In traditional musical works, in most cases, we are faced with complexities which we cannot fragment or change without altering the sense of the composition itself. Concerning this aspect, artificial intelligence can come to our assistance, in helping to create music for precise therapeutic aims, with characteristics which can be altered and re-modelled and, above all, in allowing us to simplify the musical structure using the precise elements and parameters which have proved significant for the therapeutic project. Therefore, music is founded not on aesthetic principles, but on healing aims; music is created to reduce symptoms or to modify a clinical condition. A further advantage lies in the possibility of knowing the substance of which the music is made, permitting the comparison between musical structures and parameters and therapeutic results, with the possibility to intervene in these aspects to improve the efficacy of the proposed listening material. It was exactly this intent that recently brought into being an algorithm, Melomics-Health, which composes music with a “therapeutic” logic (Raglio et al., 2017). Melodies are composed which present specific parameters in terms of timbre, tonal environment, tempo, intervals, pitches, dynamics and density, and which characterize listening according to the therapeutic aim. Knowledge from bio-medicine, neurosciences, music psychology, and clinical practice inform and support these choices, based on which Melomics-Health composes the musical works (Spotify offers an example of this type of music composition created for relaxing or pain reduction, Melomics-Health playlist: For Relaxation op.1 ad op. 2; For Pain Relief op.1 and op. 2). A recent study (Raglio et al., 2021) involving subjects with and without musical training compared conventional music with algorithmic music with respect to perception and short-term effects. The study concluded that there aren't significant differences between the two types of music both in perception and in relaxing effects considered in the research. The musical product is hardly distinguishable from a melody created



Figure 1a.



Figure 1b.

Figure 1. a. *The Andalusia Technology Park (University of Malaga, Spain): the room where the Melomics-Health algorithm was created* - b. *The Istituti Clinici Scientifici Maugeri SpA (Pavia, Italy): the site where Melomics-Health studies are taking place*

by a composer following similar indications for the musical structure and parameters. Algorithmic songs are works that have never been heard before, written with musical “aesthetics” but, above all, for the purpose of therapy. Melomics-Health allows us therefore to study the effect of specific musical parameters and structures on individuals (including neuro-scientific aspects) with the possibility to correlate effectiveness and efficiency to those precise musical aspects and to re-model the latter based on these findings. Through randomized controlled trials focusing on the algorithm, traditional music, and the absence of music, studies are now taking place to measure the effects of these approaches within the contexts of ongoing pain and stress, and in oncology. The use of algorithms applied to music as therapy constitutes a starting point, not an arrival. It is an attempt to bring art and science closer together, to increase awareness and effectiveness in the use of music in therapeutic contexts; a new perspective integrating art, science, and technology in the service of medicine, in clinical work and research.

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#### Declaration of Interest

I declare no competing interests.

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None.

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