

Original Contributions - Originalbeiträge

Rosemarie Tüpker

Music in Gestalt Theory, Morphology and Music Therapy

Gestalt theory and music

“This irrefutably shows that melody or tone structure is something other than the sum of the individual tones on which it is based (von Ehrenfels, 1890, p. 191).

Model examples play a special role in scientific theory: they are not proof in the empirical sense, but as typical individual cases they point to essential features of a paradigm and are therefore “irrefutable”. As explanatory models, they are experienced as immediately evident and introduce newcomers to the *scientific community* of a new theory, make it comprehensible, seek to convince and often serve to distinguish it from other, earlier views. Even though early Gestalt theory was otherwise more concerned with visual than auditory phenomena, music played an important role in this function. Christian von Ehrenfels’ treatise “Über Gestaltqualitäten” (On Gestalt Qualities), published in the quarterly journal for scientific psychology in 1890, can be regarded as the beginning of Gestalt psychology. Drawing on the work of Ernst Mach (1886), von Ehrenfels explained his new perspective using the example of melody so convincingly that it is still used today to characterise the Gestalt theory paradigm: We do not perceive a melody as an addition of tones, nor tone by tone, nor interval by interval, but as a whole structure. It is more and different than the sum of its parts (supersummativity). If we intone it one tone higher or lower, all the individual tones change, but it remains the same structure, which we immediately recognise as such (transposability). Depending on its structural height, it remains recognisable as such even through the wildest changes, embellishments and concealments (cf. von Ehrenfels, 1890, pp. 189-193). This is the basis of the great variation works of classical and romantic music, as well as many cover versions in pop music. In our experience, a familiar melody can be distinguished as a figure against a background, even if it is embedded in a complex polyphonic work. The foreground and background can be shifted in the sense of a reversible figure, for example in a fugue. The aesthetic appeal of such works lies in this hiding and yet being able to find them again.

Friedrich Carl Stumpf (1848–1936) had an even stronger connection to music than von Ehrenfels. This scientist, who was highly regarded in his day, had enjoyed an extensive musical education, both practical and theoretical, in the fields

of harmony, counterpoint and form. He repeatedly examined musical phenomena as prototypical examples and evidence of his psychological and philosophical positions. In musicology, his two-volume work “Tonpsychologie” [Psychology of Sound] (Stumpf, 1883-1890) provided the first impetus for understanding music as something psychological and musical perception (emotions) as something holistic. His writings had a major influence on the development of music psychology, which is understood as a branch of musicology.

On the one hand, Stumpf was a supporter of the newly emerging experimental methodology in psychology; on the other hand, he coined the term phenomenology, which later became the hallmark of Edmund Husserl’s philosophy, and introduced a distinctly psychological perspective into musicology. Like Sigmund Freud, Stumpf and Husserl were students of Franz Brentano, whose psychology was closely linked to philosophy. Their shared student days led to a further connection, with Husserl later qualifying as a professor under Stumpf in Halle. Stumpf worked as a full professor, first in Würzburg, then in Prague, Halle and Munich, until he became director of the Psychological Institute in Berlin in 1894. It was there that the *Berlin School of Gestalt Psychology* emerged with Stumpf’s students Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, Kurt Koffka and Kurt Lewin.

In terms of music, Stumpf devoted his studies to the historically much-discussed topics of the purity of intervals and the dichotomy of consonance and dissonance (cf. Tüpker, 2021). Contrary to earlier, often dogmatically presented views, he was able to demonstrate the context-dependence and relativity of assessments in perception and sensation, thus opening up a new, more psychological perspective on questions concerning the nature and classification of intervals as well as consonance and dissonance. Stumpf asked musically trained test subjects to assess intervals as *pure*, *too large* or *too small* and compared these judgements with the measured vibration numbers. On the one hand, he found that his test subjects’ judgements of purity were astonishingly accurate, and on the other hand, he found a “compatibility” of relatively large deviations from mathematically defined “purity”. He concluded that the explanations commonly used up to that point, such as degree of blending, muscle sensation and sense of distance, were insufficient to account for these results. Instead, he found a psychologically formulated level of explanation that was still unusual in musicology at the time, citing feelings of discomfort of a certain kind that provided information about deviations from the greatest possible blending. Regardless of the interval in question, the test subjects spoke of tension, sharpness, overstimulation, etc. for enlarged intervals and of dullness, flatness or bluntness for reduced intervals. It is a small paradox that, despite his experimentally oriented approach, Stumpf was one of the first to introduce a psychological level of explanation (cf. Stumpf & Meyer, 1898).

In contrast to the then dominant orientation of music psychology in England, Stumpf was also important for his anti-Darwinian and anti-biological interpretation of music and for his ethnomusicological research. With the newly invented Edison phonograph, he made his first recordings of Thai theatre musicians when they were performing in Berlin in 1900 and, a little later, founded the Berlin Phonogram Archive together with his former student Erich Moritz von Hornbostel. In 1999, the approximately 30,000 wax cylinders were added to the UNESCO “*Memory of the World*” register and designated as world cultural heritage. (For the eventful history of the archive and its rescue from the Nazis and the turmoil of war, see Ebeling, 2016.)

Max Wertheimer also mentioned a few music-related examples and experiments. However, they play a rather marginal role in the development of his theory or its results (cf. Wertheimer, 1923).

Connections to newer approaches in the field of Gestalt theory and music can be found, among others, in Martin Drewer (2000), who, for example, can demonstrate the existence of ambiguous figures in a musical context, which are otherwise more commonly found in the visual arts: depending on cultural background, rhythmic figures are perceived/interpreted differently in relation to their metrical basis. If this is illustrated by appropriate notation, it is possible – with the appropriate musical training – to switch between the two perceptions (ibid. pp. 59–63).

Roswitha Thomas describes further examples of the gestalt nature of musical hearing: the perception of music always occurs as a “perception of progression and forward movement” (Thomas, 1990, p. 28). Following von Ehrenfels, she emphasises that music, as a sounding movement, is always directly connected to time. This includes the impression that what has faded away is still present and continues to have an effect, or that what has faded away and what is about to be heard seem to be present at the same time. When surprising musical turns occur, the musical meaning is reinterpreted against the background of a figure-ground relationship (ibid., pp. 30–33). Much of her remarks are reminiscent of Friedrich Sanders’ concept of *actual genesis* or the morphological view of the simultaneity of formation and transformation.

From a morphological perspective, a further level can be identified in that music occurs in the space of relationships between people, between player and listener, composer and performer, two or more players. In terms of actual genesis, music creates a space for relationships; biographically, it can internalise relationships as musical structures and preserve them in a retrievable form (cf. Tüpker, 2002). As a unit of action, it creates a special space between people in which they experience and behave differently than in everyday life or in other contexts of action. With

regard to music reception, a distinction can be made between listening to music at the centre of the experience, in the background or in the in-between stage these two states (Tüpker, 2004, pp. 9-26).

Following von Ehrenfels, the morphological characteristics of the transition from one form to another can be illustrated in music, for example in modulation, with the question of how to get from A (major) to B (major) in the quickest, most skilful, most exciting or most elegant way. The characteristic feature of modulation is that it requires a path involving several stages, side paths (such as parallel chords) and connecting links, which primarily include the reinterpretation of a chord that has a different meaning in the context of the original key than in the target key (cf. Tüpker, 2017). The variety of these possible paths opens up musical play and constitutes the aesthetic appeal of modulation. In the sense of an art of transition, the study of the Gestalt rules for modulation in music can also become a “therapeutic technique” for psychotherapy in general (cf. Weber, 2006).

Gestalt theory – Gestalt therapy – Music therapy

Music shapes relationships – music makes experienced relationships audible – music therapy is aimed at understanding and transforming internalised relationships.

The various forms of what appears under the umbrella term *Gestalt therapy* in literature and various areas of practice often have only a loose connection to historical or current Gestalt theory. A distinction can be made between *Gestalt theory psychotherapy*, which developed from the Berlin School of Gestalt theory founded by Hans Jürgen Walter, and *Gestalt therapy*, which emerged in the USA after the emigration of many Gestalt psychologists by Fritz Perls and Paul Goodman. This was followed by the expansion of Hilarion G. Petzold, which describes itself as *integrative therapy*. A detailed account of these developments was most recently presented by Jürgen Kriz (2024).

Like all *arts therapies*, music therapy bases its theory and methodological approach on the major schools of psychotherapy, such as psychoanalytic, Gestalt, systemic and behavioural models (see Decker-Voigt, 2001; and Stiff & Tüpker, 2017). In some cases, they also follow further differentiations. In relation to music and Gestalt therapy, one example is *Gestalt music therapy*, which is well established in Switzerland and has had a major influence on Swiss music therapy training. Fritz Hegi formulated basic models and ways of thinking such as *figure-background*, *gestalt formation*, *organism-environment field*, *contact patterns*, the *therapeutic experiment* and the *consciousness continuum* as “tools for therapeutic relationship building” in music therapy (Hegi, 2001, p. 125). Martin Drewer added the importance of *the tendency towards Gestalt closure* and *working in the here and now* as a gliding from moment to moment as the transition from Gestalt to Gestalt,

and drew a connection to the morphological concept of *Gestalt in transformation*. He described musical improvisation in music therapy as a contact medium in the sense of Perls and transferred the *contact cycle* he described to music therapy (Drewer, 2000, p. 116).

At the Fritz Perls Institute (European Academy for Bio-Psycho-Social Health, Nature Therapies and Creativity Promotion, EAG), a form of music therapy developed that is known as *integrative music therapy* and has also established itself in Germany with its own continuing education programme (cf. Frohne-Hagemann, 1996, 2009).

At the same time, *morphological music therapy* developed, which builds on Wilhelm Salber's morphological psychology and also incorporates psychoanalytic aspects, in particular self- and object relations theories and recent developments in developmental psychology.

Morphological music therapy emerged from the collaboration between the author and her three music therapy colleagues Frank Grootaers, Tilmann Weber and Eckhard Weymann. The group researched and taught in the 1980s as *a research group on the morphology of music therapy* and later founded the *Institut für Musiktherapie und Morphologie (IMM)* (cf. Töpker & Weymann, 2021). Morphological music therapy has been integrated into several state music therapy training programmes, including at the Hamburg University of Music, the Berlin University of the Arts and the University of Münster, where the author taught from 1990 to 2017. The following remarks on the morphological method of describing and reconstructing music therapy improvisations as an example of the research methods developed by this group refer to the research of this group. Another method is the transfer of the four versions for the analysis of music therapy treatment processes (see Töpker, 1988).

Morphological investigation methods in music therapy

The subject of investigation

In almost all of the music therapy approaches mentioned above, joint improvisation plays an important role as a supplement to therapy sessions and is often regarded as the linchpin of music therapy treatment. It creates and shapes a special relationship between the client and therapist in a one-to-one setting or in a small group and has both diagnostic and therapeutic functions.

In addition to the therapeutic conversation, the client is encouraged to engage in musical interaction with the therapist. Musical instruments are available in the room that anyone can play without having to practise and without any previous musical experience. This is comparable to asking someone to paint or

sculpt in art therapy. Unlike painting, however, music therapy involves the therapist participating in the music in a creative way, thus creating a “joint work”. This requires music therapists to have professional musical training and to be experienced in free musical improvisation. In order to make it easier for the client to find expression through music, the therapist perceives what is urging to be expressed in the client at the moment of playing as a *pre-form* and picks it up by playing along. The client’s lack of experience in handling instruments is partially offset by the therapist playing along, because the therapist “lends” the client their musical training, so to speak, and thus enables them to play music. To do this, the therapist plays along in a special form of free-floating attention after first asking the patient to begin. The therapist listens for a short moment, allows himself to be affected and plays along, moving with what emerges in the patient. The fact that his own musical identity and socialisation, with all its facets, limitations and peculiarities, is involved in the joint work and helps to shape and specify the emerging musical form is not disputed, but methodically reflected upon.

Referring to Gestalt theory, Drewer points out that the meaning of music is constituted in the context of the therapeutic relationship, in *the field* or in the respective situational *Gestalt* (Drewer, 2000, p. 12). These processes are comparable to the *scenic understanding* described by Hermann Argelander and Alfred Lorenzer. This initially takes place on a largely unconscious level, comparable to “work in transference” (Körner, 2014). Although it is the patient who shapes their past experiences and current experiences in music, they do so together with the music therapist, creating a new relational reality in the here and now that becomes audible in musical form. The resulting form is therefore never merely descriptive (diagnostic), but always mutative (therapeutic) at the same time. Unlike purely verbal therapy and its often difficult-to-name nonverbal relationship aspects, music is audible. If it is recorded on an audio medium, the therapist and patient can listen to it again together, allowing it to continue to flow into the overall therapeutic process. Furthermore, it can be further reflected upon through an analysis of the music. The procedure of *description and reconstruction* described below serves this purpose.

The research method

The research methodology is based on the four versions from morphological psychology (cf. Tüpker, 1988):

1. Holistic description of experience

The starting point is the description of the experience of the improvisation to be examined by a small group. The group is not given any prior information about the client or the therapeutic situation, so that their descriptions refer exclusively

to the music heard on the recording. Those describing the music are asked to let it affect them as a whole and not to pay attention to who of those involved played what. The aim of the descriptive work is to reconstruct the case in the sense of a specific music therapy “diagnosis” or to analyse a particular situation in the treatment based on the music. The procedure is understood as an “extension” of clinical impressions through an *intersubjective analysis* of musical improvisation. It is not denied that the music is also co-created by the therapist, so that his or her musical involvement – in the sense of a countertransference that has become audible – is an integral part of the overall impression.

After listening, all members of the group record their subjective experiences in writing using images, ideas, stories, memories, impressions and reactions. They pay attention to what resonates within them, what is brought into resonance and what is triggered emotionally. The texts are first read aloud twice without comment. This is followed by an exchange of subjective impressions within the group, asking for similarities, differences, contrasts, specifications and additions. This *group discussion* leads to a *unifying description*, which is recorded as an initial summary of the music. The further steps of the investigation refer to this summary. It is only through this transfer of the “speechless” object “music” that this part of the treatment is made accessible to scientific analysis, since science relies on language.

2. Internal regulation

In the second step, we look at how the experience came about musically. This involves a musical analysis of the sound sample, which requires repeated listening, listening to individual sections, and knowledge of musical form. The connection to the experience of the whole, as recorded in the first step, must be re-established again and again to prevent getting lost in details. A complete musical analysis is not necessary, but rather a sufficiently explanatory one that serves to check and confirm the intersubjectively gained overall effect and inquires into the constitution (the musical making) of the impression. This enables objectification of the material.

3. Transformation

In order to relate the music to the patient, a third step is required, which involves drawing on additional material from the therapy. Only then is it possible to establish a concrete connection to the client’s way of life in a diagnostic sense or to the current genetic significance of this improvisation for their development during the course of treatment. From a scientific point of view, the information to be consulted depends on the question being asked, but in practice it often simply depends on what material is available. In an inpatient setting in particular, this is often a far cry from what we would expect from a regular psychological history.

Experience has shown that improvisation sometimes reflects the entirety of a way of life like a magnifying glass, but sometimes also reveals an otherwise neglected aspect or has a current relevance. In order to be able to make statements about the psychological significance of what can be heard in improvisation, it is therefore essential to go beyond the original unit of investigation of the music and ask about analogies and opposites, about extensions, additions and exaggerations. In morphology, repeated turning and turning is a methodological requirement that protects us from forming hypotheses too early, especially when the peculiarity of the material would tempt us to do so.

4. Reconstruction

If the improvisation under investigation is one of the first sessions with the patient and is intended for diagnostic purposes, the fourth step seeks a reconstruction that makes it possible to understand how the basic conditions of mental life were given form in a way that organises behaviour and experience. Such a basic form, which we also refer to as a “method of life”, is seen on the one hand as a solution that has gradually developed under the specific conditions of growing up, but on the other hand has entered into a crisis that led to the initiation of treatment. It is both something that has become and something that can change, and can be reconstructed and scientifically classified using the six Gestalt factors from morphological psychology. This perspective is intended to facilitate an understanding that is not merely a collection of disorders, deficiencies and symptoms, but one in which the functioning of the whole becomes just as clear as the disorders and conflicts into which it necessarily falls again and again, or the limits and obstacles it repeatedly encounters.

In further improvisations, the analysis can be used to understand the current treatment situation, its progress or its resistance. This can lead to the analysis and presentation of the course of treatment.

Possible applications

The examination method is available for specific *music therapy treatments*. If it is one of the first improvisations, it serves to orientate the treatment and to define the treatment task from the perspective of music as one of the two media of treatment, the second of which is usually the therapeutic conversation. By comparing further improvisations, the musical manifestations of therapeutic development can then be examined.

Another practical application is a specific form of music therapy *supervision* in which the supervisee wishes their issues to be examined from a musical perspective. The examination method is often tailored to the supervisee's needs and the time available.

Another *scientific application* revolves around the question of whether certain clinical pictures are associated with comparable reflections in musical composition and expression. Various studies have been conducted for this purpose, comparing several improvisations by patients with the same diagnosed illness. This very time-consuming but psychologically insightful research method has so far been used in dissertations on somatoform pain disorders (Kalle-Krapf, 2007), schizophrenia (Kunkel, 2008) and eating disorders (Reichert, 2012). A summary can be found in Kalle-Krapf/Kunkel/Reichert 2011). Further studies were conducted as part of diploma and master's theses on the diseases/subject areas of drug addiction (Hippel, 2002), borderline disorders (Tönnies, 2002), anorexia (Erhardt, 2003), dementia (Schütt, 2005) and depression (Kämpf, 2020).

The overarching question of whether the illness can be categorised in the initial improvisations cannot be answered uniformly. Apart from the fact that the material available in each case varied due to external circumstances, there also appear to be differences in the individual areas examined. It could be that certain illnesses show a high degree of psychological similarity among those affected, while others show less.

Example

The following is a summary of the study on the initial improvisations of patients with persistent somatoform pain disorder (cf. Kalle-Krapf, 2007; Kalle-Krapf et al., 2011). In addition to individual characteristics and uniqueness in the concrete musical form, the eight improvisations examined showed strong similarities and characteristic patterns, both in terms of the effect of the music (step 1) and on the analysed musical level (step 2). A consistent feature of the effect was the lack of connection, even loneliness, of the figures in the associated images, as well as the absence of boundaries in time and space, which was often described as “infinity”. The lack of embellishment also created an impression of barrenness, even to the point of a threatening dissolution of the subject. This corresponded to the musical form, in which the improvisations exhibited only minimal dynamics and phrasing: the pieces were consistently quiet, without any discernible beat or distinctive rhythmic or melodic motifs. The analyses revealed a lack of communication between the two players, a lack of connection and a lack of emotional expression.

Based on the six design factors from morphological psychology, the following characteristics and special features were consistently identified: There are clear tendencies towards expansion that are not limited. These manifest themselves in the form of unstructuredness, eternity, infinity and vastness. In contrast, the factor of equipment, as the opposite pole, is characterised by a lack of limitation and a weakly developed structure, and is therefore hardly effective. By not limiting expansion in infinite space, it becomes almost impossible to perceive

one's own identity. The arrangement of tones in the musical sense lacks structure and thus audible diversity. As a result, there are no developments 'from – to', so that even the formative factor of transformation can contribute little to mobility and change. New impulses are not allowed and cannot be appropriated. Instead, the unstructured expanse is retained. Appropriation and transformation cannot therefore set any change in motion. This is also evident in the factor of influence: since adaptation is in the foreground, there is neither mutual influence between the two players nor a stronger effect on the listeners.

The question of whether the initial improvisations of this group show similarities could therefore be answered in the affirmative for the improvisations examined. The similarities found in the mental structure suggest that the patients in this group not only share pain as a symptom, but also a mental structure from which their lives, including their pain, are organised.

In addition, the analysis based on the gestalt factors provided hypotheses for a broader understanding of this specific condition: The author of the study assumes a connection between the lack of emotional expression, the perceptibility of the self and the development of symptoms. The tendency of the mental structure to disintegrate could be related to pain as a structure-forming, stabilising characteristic. This is evident in the one-sided emphasis on individual form tendencies and the lack of communication and complementarity between the individual Gestalt factors. As a result, no beneficial development cycle can be achieved.

Kalle-Krapf describes it as unclear whether this is a psychological structure underlying the symptoms or a consequence of long-term pain experience. Although further research is recommended due to the low number of improvisations examined, the author – taking into account musical characteristics already described in the context of this clinical picture – draws practical conclusions for therapeutic treatment based on the particular structure of the Gestalt factors: She recommends strengthening the Gestalt factor of equipment in order to structure the spread from there and counteract the lack of differentiation. Through concrete musical forms of interaction, it is possible to promote development through contrasts, variations and new impulses and to work directly on the lack of emotional expression. However, it is important not to impose rules from outside, so as not to promote feelings of external control and passive tendencies. Rather, care must be taken to ensure that it is the patient's own impulses that are developed and differentiated (Kalle-Krapf, 2007, see presentation and discussion of the results, in the original on p. 255).

Summary

The article deals with the connection between music, Gestalt theory and music therapy. It sheds light on the historical foundations of Gestalt theory and its application in music psychology, particularly from the perspective of morphological psychology.

An examination method from morphological music therapy is presented, with which a psychological analysis of musical improvisations is possible in four versions. A clinical study demonstrates the significance for therapeutic practice by highlighting the relationship between musical forms of expression and psychological processes.

Keywords: Music, Gestalt theory (Ehrenfels, Stumpf) music therapy, morphological psychology, improvisation

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel behandelt die Verbindung zwischen Musik, Gestalttheorie und Musiktherapie. Er beleuchtet die historischen Grundlagen der Gestalttheorie und deren Anwendung in der Musikpsychologie, insbesondere aus der Perspektive der Morphologischen Psychologie. Es wird ein Untersuchungsverfahren aus der Morphologischen Musiktherapie vorgestellt, mit dem in vier Versionen eine psychologische Analyse musikalischer Improvisationen möglich ist. Eine klinische Studie zeigt die Bedeutung für die Bedeutung für die therapeutische Praxis, indem sie die Beziehung zwischen musikalischen Ausdrucksformen und psychologischen Prozessen herausarbeitet.

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Rosemarie Tüpker, born in 1952, taught as a professor of music therapy at the University of Münster until 2017. After studying music at the Cologne University of Music, she studied musicology (Jobst Fricke), psychology (Wilhelm Salber) and philosophy at the University of Cologne, as well as music therapy at the Herdecke mentor course. She received her doctorate in 1988 and her habilitation in 2005. Her research focuses on morphological psychology and music therapy, fairy tale research and scientific rigour in artistic therapies.

Korrespondenzadresse: Goldstr. 58, D-49565 Steinfurt

E-Mail: Dr.RosemarieTuepker@t-online.de

Webseite: <https://www.rosemarietuepker.de/>

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