

LEE LI MING  
PROGRAMME IN  
AGEING URBANISM

# Music Therapy for Seniors

Arts and Culture for the  
Elderly<sup>1</sup>

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## The Soothing Sounds of Music

Ageing can leave older people physically frail. For those who are unable to participate in more complex physical activities such as dance or *taichi*, music is a great alternative.

Music therapy could be as simple as the senior person listening to their favourite tunes or more interactive such as in music-making sessions where they play instruments like hand chimes or percussion. It can even be self-administered, making it cost-effective and practical for elderly with limited mobility. One way to apply music therapy is by having family members set up music playlists for elderly relatives who are bed-ridden or home-bound.

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<sup>1</sup>This is an evolving database. We will be adding more examples and cases over time.

Studies have shown that music therapy can reduce agitation and anxiety in dementia patients while restoring cognitive and motor function. Patients with Parkinson’s disease see gains in motor, affective and behavioural functions. After going through music therapy intervention, depressed seniors had significantly better scores than the control group on standardized tests of depression, self-esteem and mood. Older adults who have trouble sleeping can listen to music to relax, or ease pain by taking their mind off it.

A music therapy programme in Aomori Jikeikai Hospital in Japan saw music therapist Yumiko Sato playing a Dvorak adaptation on a harp for an 85-year-old female patient warded in the hospital’s palliative care unit. The music lifted the patient’s mood in spite of her ill health and helped her recall pleasant childhood memories.

### *Music & Memory – New York, USA*

In a now-viral YouTube video clip from the documentary *Alive Inside*, we see how Henry, an elderly dementia patient who was previously unresponsive and passive, is reinvigorated and chatty after listening to music from his youth.



Figure 1 (top) A screenshot of the video showing Henry before the music intervention. (bottom) A screenshot from the video showing Henry chatting to a researcher off-screen while listening to his iPod.

The subject of the aforementioned documentary, *Music & Memory* uses the power of music to tap into deep memories untouched by dementia. It works by distributing donated iPods and other music players to senior residential and day care facilities across the USA and Canada. The programme includes teaching caregivers and senior care professionals how to create custom playlists for each individual senior, even when the patient has lost the ability to speak. Outside of North America, *Music & Memory* has expanded the programme to Australia,

where they work with the Arts Health Institute, and to the Netherlands.

### *Music for Seniors – Tennessee, USA*

Music for Seniors is a non-profit organization in Nashville that matches musicians with senior care centres and residential facilities in their community to provide live music programming to the elderly. These local musicians are mostly professional, with some semi-professional and student performers among them. The project provides them with meaningful work that engages their talent and skills.

The musicians receive a modest stipend for performing while giving the elderly a chance to experience live music entertainment. The organization uses a sliding-scale method to determine fees due on a case-by-case basis, providing subsidies of up to 100% so that any senior care organization or facility can access this service. Musicians have to attend a mandatory orientation session where they are taught the values and mission behind the model Music for Seniors employs.

Performances are scheduled according to the needs of the care facility, be it a regular weekday music programme or one-off special events. Each performance typically lasts an hour and is designed to include interaction with the elderly audience. The songs played

are based on repertoire from the seniors' era – something familiar that they can sing along or bop to. Performers interact with the audience before and after each performance, building relationships with them over repeated sessions. The focus is on connecting musicians with care facilities near their residence or workplace.

### *Sing for your Life – Kent, UK*

Sing for your Life has two methods of music outreach. The first is the Silver Song Club model, which coordinates regular social and participatory music-making sessions for older people within the community. Over 1500 elderly persons have attended Silver Song Clubs.

The sessions comprise singing, gentle chair-based exercises, using hand chimes and playing percussion. Where appropriate, caregivers also participate. Each session lasts 90 minutes, with a refreshment break halfway through. They are held in residential care facilities, community venues and day care centres. Facilitators range from professional performers and community musicians to teachers and music therapists.

The second method uses a modified karaoke device called The Silver Song Music Box™ that is also used in the Silver Song Clubs. It was developed by the organization to function

like a karaoke machine but without the disorienting visuals, instead displaying simple colour backgrounds to accompany song lyrics. A specially developed piano accompaniment replicates “singing round the piano in a pub or in the home”. The small device plugs into televisions or projector and speaker systems and enables caregivers to spontaneously hold singing sessions in their facility. This programme is run for residential care facilities, daycare and hospitals and is a simple way for organizations to start a music programme.

### *Karaoke Therapy in Tokyo, Japan*

Launched by the Kiyose municipal government in west Tokyo, it is part of an initiative to reduce the strain on nursing services and infrastructure through preventive care that keeps the elderly actively engaged physically and mentally.

The programme was created together with physicians and music therapists. Each 90-minute session is led by a music therapist and held once a week at three locations in the city. It costs participants 200 Japanese yen (SGD2.67) per session. One such facility is a room in a multipurpose facility, which had about 40 participants (aged 66-93) singing enthusiastically.

The karaoke machines used in the programme differ from regular machines as they feature a collection of songs that encourage physical movement while singing. For example, waving their hands in the air when singing the lyrics “waving my handkerchief from the train window” from the popular tune *Kogen Resha wa Iku* (There goes the plateau train). Such machines with accompanying exercise programmes emerged in the early 2000s and were mainly used by nursing care facilities.

Officials in charge report seeing improvements in participants’ moods and lifestyle habits as the karaoke sessions also promote social interaction among participants. Similar programmes are being launched in other Japanese cities like Machida and Fukuoka. In Nagano Prefecture, the city of Matsumoto reports that the karaoke programme has a higher participation rate among elderly men than other activities with similar objectives. It is thus rolling out a special programme targeting male retirees to encourage them to stay active.

Miho Ogawa, a music therapist, shared some tips for the elderly to enjoy karaoke (Box 1).

#### **Box 1: Tips for Elderly to Enjoy Karaoke**

- **Choose songs you like** – old-time favourites are fine - and put your heart

into your singing. This leads to a positive mindset and improves memory recall. Even just humming is fine.

- **Singing as a group** can eliminate feelings of loneliness. Try singing a duet with a friend of the opposite sex on occasion.
- **Instruments offer light exercise** – use noisemakers, bells and other instruments.
- **Lower the tone of songs on the karaoke machine** as voices become lower with age.
- **Take a short break after each song.** Avoid singing too much, which places a burden on the vocal cords and elsewhere on the body.

Source: *FEATURE: Japanese seniors keep in shape through karaoke*,  
<http://www.asianews.network/content/feature-japanese-seniors-keep-shape-through-karaoke-3949>, accessed 8 July 2016.

### *Music and Movement Programme for Elderly with Dementia, Hong Kong*

The programme was part of a study conducted by the University of Hong Kong's Centre for Behavioural Health and the Tung Wah Group of Hospitals (TWGH). It was developed as a non-pharmacological

intervention for elderly Hong Kongers with dementia by a team of therapists from different arts backgrounds such as music and dance.

The 30-minute classes were held twice a week for eight weeks at residential seniors homes run by TWGH. A typical class included breathing exercises and listening to Chinese opera as well as Cantonese pop songs from the 1950s-1970s. Participants were encouraged to sing along or move to the music and could use props such as maracas or artificial flowers.

At the end of the programme, A4-sized cards containing vibrant images accompanied by song lyrics were developed for distribution to the residential facilities as a temporary measure while more research on the subject is carried out.

Sources:

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