THE EFFECTS OF MUSIC AS A FORM OF REHABILITATION FOR PRISONERS

By

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To my fellow University of Florida Class of 2020 Seniors. We may have lost our final semester and graduation due to the tragedy that is COVID-19, but we still did it. Together. Go Gators.
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Chair: Janna Lower
Major: Music in Combination with an Outside Field

The majority of prisoners in America will become repeat offenders within nine years of their first release from a correctional institution. To combat the issue of recidivism – when former prisoners commit a crime that returns them to a correctional facility - many prisons have instated various rehabilitation programs for prisoners. Music programs are slowly gaining more of a wide-spread use within these prison rehabilitation programs. I refer to three music rehabilitation programs in this paper: “Ubuntu” at Madison Correctional Institution, “Music for Transformation” led by Decoda at Lee Correctional Institution, and a Classical Guitar Program at Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Facility. Additionally, I refer to three different experiments that collected quantitative and qualitative data on similar programs and their effects on the prisoners. This study concludes that music programs within prisons are a useful resource for lowering the number of recidivism cases as well as bringing about positive behavioral changes in prisoners.

Keywords: Correctional Institution, Prison, Music Rehabilitation Program, Prisoners, Recidivism, and Executive Functioning.
In the song “Jailhouse Rock,” Elvis Presley sang these lyrics:

Spider Murphy played the tenor saxophone
Little Joe was blowing on the slide trombone
The drummer boy from Illinois went crash, boom, bang
The whole rhythm section was the Purple Gang
Let’s rock, everybody, let’s rock
Everybody in the whole cell block
Was dancing to the Jailhouse Rock\(^1\)

In 1957, this song was a chart-topping hit that everyone was listening to, and even today, Rolling Stones ranks it as the 67\(^{th}\) best song of all time.\(^2\) However, what if there was some truth behind these lyrics that went deeper than it being a song that people like to dance to or that has humorous lyrics? What if bringing music into prisons really did bring prisoners together and even made them better people, who want to turn their lives around? We know that music has a way of doing all of these things in various ways. For example, when a congregation sings a National Anthem, it has a way of bringing a nation’s patriots together in a shared love of their homeland. Additionally, the process of learning to play an instrument or sing can develop one’s work ethic, emotional depth, self-assurance, and patience.

Some correctional institutions are including music in their rehabilitation programs. The overarching goals of these programs are to bring about a change in prisoners, so they do not

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\(^1\) Elvis Presley, “Jailhouse Rock,” by Mike Stoller, recorded September 1957, RCA Victor, track number 1 on Jailhouse Rock, 1957, EP.

become repeat offenders and are better prepared to enter back into society. Although there are relatively few of these programs in U.S. correctional institutions, there is clear evidence that when they are effectively implemented, many prisoners’ lives are transformed.

**The Repeat-Offender Crisis**

Parents discipline their children to teach them right from wrong and to discourage their children from repeating certain behaviors. Correctional institutions function in the same way. Because so many prisoners will eventually be released back into society in their lifetime, we want them to be better people than they were when they got sent into the prison. However, according to the United States Department of Justice, on average, 83% of prisoners in America are arrested again within nine years of their release date from a correctional institution.\(^3\) Of those repeat offenders, more than half are arrested again less than a year after their release.

With these statistics, it is evident that when prisoners come out of correctional institutions, more often than not, they have not gone through a total transformation of self. Thus, we are faced with the task of identifying and developing correctional institutions that have more cases of prisoners who never return upon their release. Many correctional institutions are adding rehabilitation programs to their correctional facilities to bring about a change in prisoners, so they do not become repeat offenders and are better prepared to enter back into society. Some current programs include academic education, career technical education, cognitive behavioral therapy, employment preparation, and substance abuse disorder treatment. Music rehabilitation programs are slowly gaining implementation in correctional facilities.

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CHAPTER 2
CURRENT MUSIC PROGRAMS IN CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

While many correctional facilities across America do not have music programs, the facilities that do include music in their rehabilitation programs, have seen significant results. This chapter will discuss three different correctional facility music programs and the impact each program had on the prisoners.

“Ubuntu” at Madison Correctional Institution

The word “ubuntu” when translated from Zulu means humanity, virtue, goodness, or kindness in English. It is also the name of a music program in the Madison Correctional Institution in London, Ohio. This music program, founded by Dr. Catherine Roma and John Wright, truly exemplifies “ubuntu.” Dr. Roma was the professor of music at Wilmington College in southern Ohio for twenty-five years, and after retiring, she established this program alongside Mr. Wright. She believes that choral singing is “a path to justice, inclusion, and love, with the conviction that collective and cooperative power enables singers to inspire, motivate, educate, and heal an ailing world.” It is this belief that led her from directing the Cincinnati Women’s Choir to directing four different Ohio prison choirs instead, including Ubuntu.

The men in this program are accepted on account of their good behavior instead of musical ability. Dr. Roma and Mr. Wright teach them how to sing both individually and as a choir. The men are given the same treatment and expectations that a university student studying vocal performance would be given. They are taught proper diction, expression, breathing, vocal

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technique, and interpretation. In addition to learning and improving their vocal skills, they are also given opportunities to perform the pieces they rehearse.

In 2018, Heartbeat Opera, an opera company in New York City, commissioned Ubuntu and five other prison choirs to record Beethoven’s “Prisoner Chorus” from his opera, Fidelio. Heartbeat Opera took the recordings from each prison and edited them together into one CD. They used this CD in their live performances of the opera, bringing the prisoner’s music outside of the prison walls. Derek, a former prisoner who was a performer on the CD, said the following about the primary goal of the recording project: “We wanted to find a way to generate revenues for some non-profit organizations that work to serve the people in the communities where we had support, nurture, and succor in our lives. We sought a way to give back to these communities while simultaneously living in an area cordoned by concertina wire and guards with weapons outside the parameters.”

Another musical project Ubuntu accomplished was a performance of the musical, Les Miserables by Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg and based on the book by Victor Hugo. For this musical production, the prisoners not only learned all of the music; they also gave a performance inside the prison’s chapel that was open to other prisoners, prison staff, and the community of London, Ohio. A video of the performance can be found at the following link: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrAwywGiJeM&feature=youtu.be). Aside from being an excellent musical production, it also exposed the prisoners to a genre of music many of them had never known before. They learned how to sing classically, work well with others, listen to and

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5 Ohio Voices for Justice, “John Wesley Wright – Ubuntu,” YouTube, June 12, 2016, video, 0:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1VYsi8UQ8
6 Heartbeat Opera, “Heartbeat Opera collaborates with six prison choirs on Fidelio,” YouTube, April 21, 2018, video, 1:45, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J.ipFPVLUS8
7 Wright, “Prisons and the Power of Performance: Reflections on Vocal Coaching for Men and Women Behind Bars,” 575.
apply critiques, express their emotions through music, and so much more. Bryan Singleton, a choir member of Ubuntu, wrote a letter about his experience performing Les Misérables. Below is a quote from his letter.

This was a story of “Villain to Virtue.” Truly, in my life and in the lives of all those involved. A story that our country is currently living out and the tale has a different ending for everyone. That difference indicates our own power over our own destiny and taking part in this endeavor gives so much hope to all of us involved. Anyone who has taken this to heart has given it a home there. The students said their lives were forever affected. We are truly blessed. So many men who were in the packed audience said that they had never experienced anything like this at all. People who have the hardest exterior were moved to tears by the songs and the emotions that filled the air. In all my twenty-one years in prison, never have I seen or felt the heart of so many being affected.8

“Music for Transformation” led by Decoda at Lee Correctional Institution

It may be challenging to picture a room full of convicted murderers, drug dealers, and thieves who are wearing prison jumpsuits, standing on a stage, performing a piece that was composed within prison walls. However, that is what occurs regularly at Lee Correctional Institution through their “Music for Transformation” program led by Decoda. Decoda is a non-profit music collective that partners with New York City’s Carnegie Hall.9 Several times a year, Decoda conducts a week-long music-intensive that is open to prisoners who live in a “character-based” unit, which houses the more well-behaved prisoners. In addition to the “Music for

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9 Adam Parker, "Inmates study music in maximum-security Lee Correctional Institution," The Post and Courier, April 14, 2019, 1.
Transformation” program, there is another weekly program in the prison where prisoners can learn how to play the guitar, violin, keyboard, cello, drums, and bass, and trumpet.\textsuperscript{10}

“Music for Transformation” was founded by Claire Bryant, a professional cellist, and is led by her and more than 30 other professional musicians. During the week Decoda is at the prison, they work with the prisoners, every day, for eight hours a day. The prisoners receive lessons on their instrument, are exposed to many genres of music, and are guided in the songwriting process. By the end of the week, the prisoners will have composed and prepared more than a dozen pieces, which they perform together. Kenneth Nelsen, a warden of the prison, said that although the music program was initially met with criticism by administrators, it has proven to be beneficial. There is almost always someone in the unit practicing his instrument and they have seen a decline in behavioral issues among the prisoners involved in the program.\textsuperscript{11}

This video provides more of a glimpse into this program and the positive effects it has on the prisoners: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myDWhetc7Xo). In this video, one of the prisoners in the program said the following about the impact that he has seen it make on his own life and the lives of his fellow inmates:

Before [this program], I was never exposed to classical music or chamber music or anything that was cultured…. But we have an opportunity in this program to put away the violence and all these other mediums of expression that do nothing but hurt people and we can channel those feelings and expressions into music. We’re able to practice and actually get together and just for that moment, just for that little bit of time you’re able to take your armor off for once and just breathe. It’s been a big tool to help me change. We have a phrase that we use- we have to act hard, you know, act tough, put on sort of a

\textsuperscript{11}Adam Parker, "Inmates study music in maximum-security Lee Correctional Institution," 9.
facade and now we can channel those feelings and expressions into music, which is the
most positive way to express yourself.¹²

**Classical Guitar Program at Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Facility**

The final music rehabilitation program in a correctional facility we will discuss can be
found at the Gardner Betts Juvenile Justice Facility. This facility holds 120 inmates and
functions as a residential juvenile justice facility.¹³ Travis Marcum, a music educator, started the
classical guitar program for the inmates at this facility back in 2010. Since starting the program,
he has taught thirteen different groups of students. Marcum says that some of the biggest things
his students learn is how to take objective criticism, express their emotions through music
instead of violence, and how to work through something new and challenging.¹⁴

“Not a week passes that a staff employee or counselor does not approach me to talk about
how much better an individual student is doing since he or she began guitar class.” Marcum says,
“The staff, who spend day and night with these children, see large changes in general well-being,
happiness, cooperation, and communication as a result of playing music.”¹⁵ On the first day of
guitar class with each new group of students, Marcum has the students answer four questions:

1. Why do you want to take guitar class?
2. Are you good at guitar now?
3. If not, do you think that someday you can be good at guitar?
4. Are you really good at anything right now, such as science, soccer, acting, and so on?

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¹² Great Big Story, “Freedom to Play: Music As Prison Rehabilitation,” YouTube, February 18, 2016, video, 0:53,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myDWhetc7Xo.
¹³ “Travis County Gardner-Betts Juvenile Justice Center Basic Information,” Prison Roster, accessed March 13,
¹⁴ Travis Marcum, “Artistry in Lockdown: Transformative Music Experiences for Students in Juvenile Detention,”
In response to question 1, Marcum reports that most students write that they needed it for school credit or that they want a way to escape from their imprisonment mentally. In response to questions 2 and 3, most students respond that they are not good at guitar now and that they might be able to be good with much work. Finally, for question 4, most students respond that they have never had a hobby or anything they have ever practiced. After the students answer these questions, he begins his first lesson with all the students. Over the weeks of lessons, he encourages the students to play more difficult repertoire and critique each other, all the while helping them process their frustrations and anger and keep their emotions under control. Upon completing this program, there is an evident change in the lives of the students.

The following link provides a look into this program and contains interviews with three juvenile inmates who explain how this program has changed their lives: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXaWyNwIsUM). This short film covers the impact the program had on several students’ lives, including Peter’s. He was a high school dropout but says that because of how much this guitar program changed him as a person, he has since graduated high school, and after serving his time, he plans to attend San Jacinto College to study music production. He said “I dropped out in the tenth grade. I didn’t go back [to school] until I got locked up. I would have never taken guitar without being here. My mom’s excited, because usually, if she heard something about me, it was always bad and I feel good to have something good [to tell her] like graduating high school, learning how to play the guitar, and going to [college]. Now, every time she sees me, she just smiles.”

CHAPTER 3  
EFFECTS OF MUSIC PROGRAMS ON PRISONERS

As was made evident in the last chapter, music programs genuinely have a positive effect on prisoners in correctional facilities. Now that we have learned more about several different types of programs and how they are run, we are going to take a look at both quantitative and qualitative data that supports the positive impact that music rehabilitation programs can have on prisoners.

**Recidivism**

As previously discussed in chapter one, on average, 83% of prisoners are arrested again within nine years of their release date from a correctional institution in the United States.\(^{18}\) This percentage is substantial and reveals that many prisoners have not, in fact, been meaningfully rehabilitated when they finish their sentences. The following evidence shows that when a prisoner is involved in a music program, his or her likelihood of recidivism decreases. In 2014, there was a study conducted by Christian Gold et al. at Bjørgvin Prison in Norway.\(^{19}\) In this study, the researchers studied how a music rehabilitation program could affect a prisoner’s mental health; specifically depression, anxiety, and social relationships.\(^{20}\) Six years later, in 2020, another study was conducted by many of the same researchers to learn some of the long-term effects this music program may have had on the prisoners who participated in the previous study in 2014.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{20}\) Gold et al. “Music Therapy for Prisoners: Pilot Randomised Controlled Trial and Implications for Evaluating Psychosocial Interventions,” 1523-1524.

In their study, they acknowledge that their data had limitations, such as the limited amount of music sessions they were permitted to have with the prisoners. However, their results did reveal evidence that prisoners who had been through their music rehabilitation program were less likely to commit a crime that would send them back to prison. Figure 1 depicts their findings related to the probability of criminal relapse, of the 64 participants they studied.

Figure 3-1. Probability curves illustrating criminal relapse in 64 prisoners who were randomly place six years prior into either a music program or a control group.

Although this study encountered limitations that make it difficult to claim that the results are conclusive, Gold et al. suggests that if another study were to be conducted, there might be more statistically significant data supporting the notion that music rehabilitation programs in prisons can decrease recidivism amongst prisoners.²²

²² Gold et al. “Long-Term Effects of ShortTerm Music Therapy for Prison Inmates: Six-Year Follow-Up of a Randomized Controlled Trial,” 11-12.
Executive Functioning

According to a study by Elisha A. Elis in 2014, executive functioning is “a body of various skills related to regulatory control over thought and behavior involving the inhibitory response, flexible shifting of actions to meet task demands’, emotional control, self-monitoring, goal-directed or intentional action, working memory, and organization of materials.” Seeing as it is often a person’s lack of control over their thoughts and actions that lead them to prison initially, prisoners must improve in these areas while in prison to be rehabilitated and changed for the better.

In Elis’s study, she experimented to see if prisoners had higher executive functioning scores after participating in a rehabilitative music program within the prison. The study consisted of two groups of prisoners: a control group that was talking-based and focused on teaching skills to improve the prisoner’s executive functioning skills and an experimental group that focused on the same executive functioning skills, but instead of requiring the group to talk, they learned and played music. In the music group, they learned how to sing and play the keyboard, guitar, and various percussion instruments to songs with positive lyrics.

Her study revealed that 100% of the participants who participated in the music program had an increase in the raw score of their executive functioning test. Contrastingly, only 40% of the participants who participated in the talk-based group had improved scores. In addition to this quantitative data, the qualitative data revealed that participants in music therapy reported

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24 Ellis, “THE EFFECT OF MUSIC THERAPY ON EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS IN MALE, INCARCERATED ADULTS IN A CORRECTIONAL FACILITY,” 54.
feelings of improved self-worth and a decrease in depression.\textsuperscript{25} Many of the participants also reported that while in the music sessions, they felt relaxed and less stressed.\textsuperscript{26}

Another study, conducted in 2009 by Mary L. Cohen, provides very similar results to Ellis’ study as well.\textsuperscript{27} Cohen conducted her experiment in a men’s prison with the experimental group consisting of inmates in the “Therapeutic Community Inmate Singers,” who rehearsed and performed as a choir within the prison. In contrast, the control group consisted of a group of inmates who were not in her choir. For nine weeks, Cohen measured each prisoners’ levels of overall well-being, sociability, self-esteem, joviality, emotional stability, and happiness. She also measured the nominal data of how the prisoners were feeling at the end of each session.

The results revealed a statistically significant increase in the music group’s overall well-being, joviality, and emotional stability scores.\textsuperscript{28} The results of the nominal data showed that at the end of the study, 65\% of the responses to the question of “How am I feeling?” from the control group were positive, while 95\% of the responses from the music group were positive. This is a difference of 30\%.\textsuperscript{29} In addition to the music program sessions, at the end of the nine-week study, the choir performed a concert for their fellow inmates and staff. After the inmates performed in the concert, the data from Cohen’s experiment show increases that are significantly higher in the music group than the control group in several categories, including sociability, joviality, emotional stability, and happiness.\textsuperscript{30} This evidence supports the notion that music

\textsuperscript{25}Ellis, “THE EFFECT OF MUSIC THERAPY ON EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS IN MALE, INCARCERATED ADULTS IN A CORRECTIONAL FACILITY,” 52.
\textsuperscript{26}Ellis, “THE EFFECT OF MUSIC THERAPY ON EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SKILLS IN MALE, INCARCERATED ADULTS IN A CORRECTIONAL FACILITY,” 52.
\textsuperscript{28}Cohen, “Choral Singing and Prison Inmates: Influences of Performing in a Prison Choir,” 56.
\textsuperscript{29}Cohen, “Choral Singing and Prison Inmates: Influences of Performing in a Prison Choir,” 63.
programs in prisons can help rehabilitate prisoners because all of these categories are crucial elements of a productive, good member of society.

CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

Music has the power to make people feel a myriad of emotions. Whether it is laughing and feeling jovial while listening to Mozart’s *A Musical Joke, K. 522* or crying and feeling sorrow while listening to John William’s “Theme from Schindler’s List,” music has the power to affect us, profoundly. It also teaches musicians the value of hard work, teamwork, dedication, and so much more. The same is true for prisoners who are exposed to these music programs. Whether it is the music itself, the self-satisfaction of working hard, being exposed to a new genre, the thrill of performing, the process of rehearsing with others creatively, or the culmination of each, exposing prisoners to music is beneficial. Music is an instrumental factor in many prisoner’s journeys to becoming better people and productive members of society and could be a cornerstone of many more prisoners’ rehabilitation processes, as more programs are fostered.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sydney E. Lile is a graduating senior at the University of Florida, studying to receive her Bachelor of Music with a minor in Leadership. She is also currently enrolled as a combination student in the Master of Science in Management degree program at the University of Florida. She has fulfilled her Junior Recital requirement through a violin performance on April 20, 2019 at U.F.’s School of Music and participated in the University Symphony Orchestra for six consecutive semesters.