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# Containment and Communication Through Musical Preference

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## Abstract

This study was one of the 8 case studies conducted on an acute unit of a psychiatric hospital as part of a research project focused on listening to participant-selected music with patients who were in the early stages of psychosis. The central research question was to explore whether listening to music with patients could help facilitate their emotional containment and expression. What the case study illustrated was that the participant case musical selections expressed her identity and aspirations and gave form to emotional expressions that she otherwise might have had trouble assigning directly through verbal expression. Music as a meta-communication tool helped this participant articulate and contain unbearable feelings. By listening to music with the participant, the researcher was allowed brief and meaningful access and attunement to the participant's inner world. This case study provides background information about the participant, describes highlights from 10- to 30-minute listening sessions, and offers analysis of the participant's musical choices and responses to music. It is hoped that the methodology and findings of this in-depth case report might provide a means for processing, analysing, and reporting for those who practice music psychotherapy and music medicine. This may serve as particularly useful with patients who have psychiatric diagnoses or psychotic episodes.

## Keywords

music, choice, psychosis, communication, meaning

## Introduction

The central question addressed in the following case study of Hanna is whether listening to participant-selected music with a clinical therapist can facilitate emotional containment and expression, and help facilitate therapeutic rapport, for patient's experiencing early stages of psychosis. Young patients with such diagnoses are often difficult to engage in long-term treatment. Psychosis in its early stages often presents challenges for patients who are trying to translate seemingly unbearable and confusing feelings into words. Given that listening to music is often seen as a healthy and common daily activity, as well as an identity constructing and affirming activity for young people,<sup>1-4</sup> the underlying hope for this study was to provide an adjunct tool for therapists and medical professionals who seek to connect in meaningful and urgent ways with patients who experience new onset psychosis.

## Literature Review

This writer is aligned with modern neuropsychological theorists<sup>5</sup> and psychoanalytic theorists<sup>6,7</sup> who posit that severe psychopathology may be caused by a sensitive central nervous system along with environmental traumas or severe misattunement with primary caregivers. The particular psychopathology of psychosis manifests in such symptoms as fragmentation of self, disorganization, incoherent functioning, hallucinations, and delusions.<sup>8</sup> For patients with psychosis, music can serve as a mediating and metabolizing function to help digest raw

or unsettling emotional material, much like the subtle prosody of a mother's voice singing lullabies helps soothe an infant's distress. Rosenbaum and Harder<sup>9</sup> point out that looking at early developmental issues may have a present-tense relevance, as patients often have traumatic events lining up from childhood and leading up to their psychosis.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of the therapeutic efficacy of listening to music with patients to help facilitate the reparative process, Dileo and Parker<sup>11</sup> explore how listening to music with hospice patients helps restore identity, integrity, and interpersonal relationships. In a separate, earlier study, Dileo<sup>12</sup> introduced the technique of "song choice" in which a client chooses songs and then discusses the feelings and memories that the song evokes. Another music-listening technique used therapeutically is "song sensitization."<sup>13</sup> This is a technique that can be used with individuals or groups. It involves a process whereby each group member shares a personally significant song. The group listens twice to each song: once after an induction with closed eyes, and a second time while viewing and writing notes next to the provided lyrics to the song. The group then discusses the song and the feedback is shared. Finally, the song is performed and

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expressed and interpreted “live” musically as led by the member who has introduced the song. Loewy<sup>13</sup> used this technique with patients who were teens and adult patients for many years before introducing it to share a song that was meaningful to her, while working with a group of caregivers coping with the September 11 trauma. She explored the difficulty of facilitating the experience of music listening for others, while tending to her own grief and loss. In this way, song listening may be an effective vehicle for musical transference possibilities.

A substantial amount of research has been conducted addressing whether the emotional intention and expression of a composer is related to the reception and induction of emotion in the listener. Much less research has been conducted on how lyrics in music influence emotional expression.<sup>14</sup> Researchers Ali and Peynircioğlu<sup>15</sup> postulated that participants in their studies claimed that lyrics tend to detract from melody in happy and calm musical pieces; however, participants claimed that lyrics enhanced emotions in sad and angry music. Regardless of the mood of the piece, there was an overall sense that melody dominated lyrics in terms of what conveyed emotion the most to listeners.<sup>15</sup>

The link between music and the images or metaphors it inspires has also been of great interest to both science and the arts for centuries. In *Briefe II*, Jung<sup>16</sup> observed a link between music, image, and the unconscious. Jungian musical therapist, Wärja<sup>17</sup> initiated the process called guided imagery and music (GIM) with patients in psychiatric institutions. Wärja<sup>17</sup> saw music as a more expedient and safe route to help patients on a kinesthetic level to free blocked or repressed emotions and memories. The GIM system, used by Wärja,<sup>17</sup> was further developed by researcher Bonny<sup>18</sup> who defined images as anything experienced by the senses such as “thoughts, feelings, mental images or pictures, colors, memories, body sensations, and olfactory and auditory images.” Skar<sup>19</sup> moved from the metaphoric to the actual realm: she suggested that music could one day be used in the analytic process like sand play or spontaneous drawings that could be used to help articulate unconscious processes.

More than a decade ago, several research studies estimated that adolescents and young adults from the United States and the United Kingdom listened to music between 2.5 and 4 hours each day.<sup>20,21</sup> Assuredly, with the advent of portable music players, that number has increased.

In this music research study, the iPod served as a symbolic container of music, as well as an accepted culturally relevant container of self or identity.<sup>22</sup> Our era has come to assume, especially among younger generations that we are what we listen to; or that our portable music devices reflect our cultures and subcultures and are, thereby, self-defining.<sup>1-4</sup> Young people particularly walk through the world, listening to a self-selected soundtrack that mediates and memorializes their sensory connections to the world around them. The iPod could also be considered a kind of symbol for an individual or interpersonal unconscious.

## Case Study

Hanna’s story is one of the 8 psychoanalytic case studies conducted over 3 months on the acute unit of a psychiatric hospital

as research for this author’s doctoral dissertation supervised by Dr Allen Bishop of Pacifica Graduate Institute and reviewed by Dr James Grotstein and Dr Christine Lewis. The author, who is enrolled in a depth psychology program, was completing an 18-month internship in the psychiatric hospital where these case studies were conducted. The research design grew out of daily aesthetic/calming groups on the acute unit. These groups, conducted by this author, were based on Kenneth Koch’s<sup>23</sup> curriculum suggestions for teaching poetry, and on Luthe and Schulz’s work on autogenics.<sup>24</sup> Group participants eventually helped shape the calming groups into music groups centered on the patients’ musical preferences.

Participants in the research project were referred by their physicians and/or by hospital caseworkers. This writer also recruited participants directly from the calming/music groups, if the patients matched research criteria such as being within an age range (ie, 18-35 years), within a 5-year window of a first break, and within several psychoses-based diagnostic categories (ie, schizophrenia, schizoaffective, bipolar with psychotic features, and psychosis, not otherwise specified).

The music-listening sessions around which these case studies were built were not intended as a direct treatment intervention. Rather, the listening sessions were considered a prelude and adjunct to psychotherapeutic treatment. This writer chose to administer pre- and post-Rorschach assessments, because the Rorschach seemed like the most ideal psychodynamic-based instrument with which to measure a variety of indices related to containment, affect, and projection.<sup>25,26</sup> The results of the Rorschach assessments will be reviewed in the research analysis section of this article. Hanna’s case is the first of the 8 case studies to be completed and submitted for publication. The participant’s name, her city of residence, and other pertinent details of the case were modified to protect the identity and anonymity of the participant. This writer, throughout the course of conducting the 8 case studies, monitored hospital charts and consulted clinical staff. The actual research protocol involved ten 30-minute sessions wherein a clinical therapist sat alone with a participant listening to the participant’s self-selected music on an iPod speaker system. Participants requested to have particular music downloaded during the course of the listening sessions.

## Hanna’s Background

Hanna was manic and paranoid and seemed to be experiencing a kind of *primitive catastrophe*<sup>6,7,27,28</sup> when she arrived involuntarily at the acute unit of the psychiatric hospital. The 25-year-old Chinese American woman had been hospitalized twice previously; her first break had occurred when she was living abroad in Paris when she was 21 years old. At the time of this most recent involuntary admission, Hanna’s parents had become increasingly uncomfortable with her behaviors, which culminated in her physically threatening them. From Hanna’s viewpoint she believed her parents wanted to kill her. She claimed to have undergone 2 rounds of electroshock therapy

and sensed that hundreds of guns were hidden in her room. She dismantled her bedroom looking for the alleged guns.

Upon arrival at the hospital, Hanna also claimed she was being stalked by a man named Finn, whom she blamed for distorting her mind and causing poor memory. She believed that Finn had been raping her and other women. Hanna's mother told the physician that Finn was the name of a young Frenchman Hanna had been in a relationship with during a yearlong college internship in Paris, prior to 2 years. Hanna's mother also insisted that she and her husband could not allow Hanna to return home after being hospitalized. Her mother stated that Hanna would need to be placed elsewhere, such as in a group home, because she and her husband were afraid of Hanna's unpredictable behavior and believed that she needed more structure and therapeutic support than what they could provide.

Hanna was paranoid that hospital food, water, and fixtures (ie, shower and TV) were infested with illicit drugs. This intense mistrust, and reversal, of any sensory input<sup>6,23</sup> caused her to reject the creature comforts of showering and eating. Hanna was demanding and agitated; but she also relayed that she was highly sensitive to the elements of attunement<sup>29</sup> such as the tone and prosody of a voice: "I don't like emotionally crazy or volatile people. And I don't like a blunt tone of voice. I misread it."

Hanna's birth mother was Chinese and her birth father, about whom she knew very little, and whom she had never met, was American. What she did know about him was that he drank, and that he left when she was a toddler. Hanna's mother, who worked as a teacher to support herself and Hanna, remarried an American software engineer when Hanna was 8 years. The other event that Hanna described as formative from her childhood was a vivid memory of having been beaten at age 5 with a stick by her mother for 45 minutes: this image seemed akin to Damasio's<sup>30,31</sup> concept of a "somatic marker." Hanna's new stepfather had 5 children by previous marriages, the stepsiblings were at least a decade older than Hanna and had already moved out of their father's house to live independently. Hanna remained living with her parents throughout college. She returned to their home again after a college-related internship in Paris, which had terminated abruptly when Hanna had her first psychotic episode.

After a year of psychological rehabilitation wherein Hanna did nothing but paint and draw, she procured one business-related job after another in Portland. Hanna was not able to keep any of the jobs for various reasons: each time she was fired or more gently terminated. When it became clear to her parents that Hanna, at age 23, would not be able to hold down regular employment or live a "normal" life, they helped Hanna apply for public assistance. She had another psychotic episode during this transition time, which seemed to be exacerbated by Hanna's parents expressing their wish to move away to California, while leaving Hanna behind in Oregon. The prospect of being left behind or left alone was overwhelming to Hanna.

By the time she arrived at the acute unit of the hospital, she had been on disability for several months. She indicated that she felt discouraged at the stigma and the "social defeat" of not

having a "normal" job and social life.<sup>32,33</sup> Her physician gave her an Axis I diagnosis of bipolar I, manic, severe, with psychotic features.<sup>34</sup> In her legal reports, she was described as "gravely disabled."

Hanna's mood improved during the 9 weeks she stayed in the hospital, but she had increased anxiety and somatization (ie, nausea, blurred vision); she was consistently on tegretol throughout her hospitalization but because of side effects her physician stopped prescribing seroquel and started her on risperdal. Her paranoia gradually diminished in relation to her parents and Finn; however, once Hanna realized her parents were banning her from returning home from the hospital, she had frequent bouts of nausea, as well as increased hallucinations and feelings of being unsafe. After 3 weeks at the acute unit, she moved to a higher functioning unit. She remained for an additional 6 weeks in the hospital, until a group home placement opened in downtown Portland.

### Music-Listening Sessions

This writer waited for 2 weeks before approaching Hanna about the music study. Although Hanna came to the music groups that this writer facilitated daily at the acute psychotic unit, Hanna was initially hostile and dismissive toward music and toward this writer. She attacked all links between objects and between the self and the objects.<sup>6</sup> Being resistant to any sensory input, Hanna also summarily rejected or deconstructed every piece of music she heard in the daily music groups. Once Hanna's acute psychosis waned, she requested to participate in the study immediately. We ran through a sample session in which Hanna reviewed the musical selections stored on the iPod so she could suggest other music to download. Her main interests were pop, dance music, rap, and some varied rock and vocal artists.

The first session established the pattern followed throughout the 10 sessions. As was the case with all the case studies that followed Hanna's, we listened to the music on a portable speaker system, so the writer and the participant could share in the same listening experience. Hanna tried to logically structure her responses to the music by writing her impressions on a legal pad. Her first choices were Lady Gaga's "Paparazzi"<sup>35</sup> which she called "modern, upbeat, mysterious, loving, and romantic" and "Bad Romance"<sup>36</sup> to which Hanna responded "fun, assertive, and upbeat." She described how the music made her want to focus on fashion and clubbing as she had in Paris. Hanna next chose Enya's song "Orinoco Flow"<sup>37</sup> for its disciplined chords, scales, notes, logic, and rationality. She remarked how Enya moved from "music to academia" with a "steady emotional valve." Enya inspired Hanna to live her life rationally: Enya remained calm while translating "complex songs to living life."

Hanna's next song was Alice in Chains' "Man in the Box."<sup>38</sup> She referred to the song as representing "technical perfection," both in the song and in the singer. She considered the song "quiet, beautiful, and timeless"; the chords were "simple and predictable." She chose another Alice in Chains

song, “No Excuses,”<sup>39</sup> for its slow and melancholic tone. She wrote, “This is lighthearted. I see the singer and I feel in love, the way I see love when I see a painting. Love is very simple. Love is being together without explanation.” She likened Alice in Chains’ lead singer, Layne Staley, to Kurt Cobain. Both men were blond and waiflike; both struggled with heroin addiction and an abiding death instinct.<sup>40</sup> “He is extremely quiet and there is never any explanation or argument about how we feel,” she wrote, seeming to merge Staley and her ex-boyfriend Finn in fantasy. Hanna interpreted the song as an expression of comfort and unconditional love. Her next choice was Evanescence’s “Together Again”<sup>41</sup> which she interpreted as “a marriage led by God.” She imagined the singer’s voice resounding through a church full of Bible verses. “Being somewhere allows the marriage to keep going.”

The thread of existential loneliness and spiritual longing continued on through her last choice: “The Man Who Sold the World”<sup>42</sup> performed by Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. It was another song with a “melancholy and regretful tone.”<sup>43</sup> Despite the song’s remorseful tone,<sup>43</sup> Hanna found it to be “upbeat, lively”; it made her want to change her wardrobe, go to a different art show, and try to embrace something new cognitively. “When I hear Kurt Cobain’s voice,” she said, “I always think cognitively. He shakes my routine and takes me to an extracurricular activity such as an art gallery.”

A favorite artist whom Hanna frequently returned to was Suzanne Vega. Hanna described how she was inspired by Vega’s song “Calypso”<sup>44</sup> “to do something different creatively; for example, to paint differently.” She saw the music as deep and emotional, describing her most intimate feelings: “awkward, alone, and creative.” Hanna had a different admiration for Vega than for the nihilistic grunge singers like Staley. She saw Vega as a kind of transcendent figure whom she described as “penitent, mysterious, and self-learning.” She frequently chose Vega’s song “Tom’s Diner”<sup>45</sup> which seemed to symbolize a lifestyle she longed to embody. “It makes me dream,” she wrote, “That I can live in the city and walk to a diner to eat breakfast, to think, and produce ideas.” She imagined that she might be able to share this urban life with a boyfriend. Hanna also had strong associations with Vega’s song “Luka”<sup>46</sup> which is narrated in the voice of a dissociated woman who both reveals and conceals physical abuse. It is emotionally fixed and distant and like much of Vega’s music contains in its depths much wilder, primal emotions. Hanna described her fantasy of having a son named Luka. She imagined a reintegrated life in which she and Luka wrote and played together.

Gradually, Hanna wrote less and less on the legal pad, and turned more toward conversation with this author, thus taking more risks with sharing less guarded affect. She used the legal pad to write down the names of songs, so that there was a record, but she became more exploratory in her responses. Once her psychosis waned, she was consistently more melancholic, but often her feelings of sadness became somatized into stomach aches and nonspecific pains, which she described, thus giving location to her losses and anticipated losses.

Hanna believed that her existence, and reality, had been redefined according to a bipolar model. She was caught between dialectical poles: rational and emotional, Chinese and American, controlling and creative, and simple and complex. While she listened to various pieces of music, she tried to integrate these fragments of herself. She spoke of her ex-boyfriend Finn as an antidote, and a source of healing, for her condition. From a dangerous stalker, Hanna had transformed Finn into her missing twin.<sup>6</sup> Hanna wanted to rejoin with him in herself, and in the music, with this writer. “My lover is such a child,” she wrote while listening to Gaga’s “Paparazzi.”<sup>35</sup> “He is mysterious and a genius with my heart and art.” She likened wanting to be around Finn, who had been a DJ in Paris, to the romantic feelings she heard in Lady Gaga’s voice. Hanna also interspersed listening to hip/hop songs, like Lil Wayne’s “Drop The World,”<sup>47</sup> which made her consider the past and present, merging together, “I want to be with friends and not visit my past, but will my past visit me?” she wrote.

During the fifth session, Hanna brought a painting she had completed of a fish. This was one of the sessions at which she seemed the most affectively present and emotionally vulnerable. She turned down the music in this session until it became mainly background to our conversation. “I love this feeling of the pink and white coming together,” she said. “That is technical perfection. I love pastels because you can move the colors (‘smear them’). This is how I feel: soft around the edges but something hard and fast inside.” She likened the soft pink feeling to the temporary thrill she felt upon first meeting her stepfather. She recalled the early years with him as joyous, though it was a short-lived joy.

She asked this writer to download for the next session Gaga’s “Alejandro.”<sup>48</sup> She explained that Gaga, like herself, had rejected a flashy life and struggles for power inside love. Hanna saw Gaga as expressing her own deep need for love.

At the next session, Hanna revisited again her relationship with Finn while listening to Lady Gaga. Her paranoia had transmuted into longing. She thought about Finn more she said—when feeling physically sick—as someone safe to wrap herself around. She longed to return to Paris and the era before her illness. When she grew weary of talking and sentimentality, she chose “spiritual” and “organizing” music, including DMX’s “Lord Give Me A Sign”<sup>49</sup> and Peter Gabriel’s “With This Love,”<sup>50</sup> which made her feel “at church:” meaning organized, and melancholic.

In another attempt at affective linking, Hanna asked this writer to suggest some new music in the seventh and eighth sessions. This seemed like a major shift outside of herself for Hanna; this was also the first session when she asked this writer personal questions (ie, have you been married, do you have children?). Hanna stated that she could listen to most anything, but she could not tolerate western country, which reminded her of her parents. She perceived the music as a warning that someone would break into her house. Likewise, she could not tolerate classical music (ie, Bach, Chopin, and Beethoven). She switched quickly out of each piece. “I used to play classical music,” Hanna said. “But I got so tired of it. It is difficult when

there is technical and emotional together. It never answered questions.” She switched abruptly to the more superficial and upbeat New Kids on the Block’s “Dirty Dancing”<sup>51</sup> song, which reminded her of optimistic moments when she felt she had more potential. With Hanna there was always this movement toward and abruptly away from, and circling back toward emotional connection. Austin and Dvorkin describe these rhythms of resistance and reconnecting through music as being natural to the therapeutic process.<sup>52</sup>

In the ninth session, Hanna referred to herself as her “father’s NPR,” by which she seemed to be comparing herself to a national public radio talk show host. Hanna described how she often offered her father advice about repairing relationships with his ex-wives and several children from previous marriages. She considered that her father had been neglectful of all of his children, including herself. “It is better for me,” she said, “to look for love outside my parents.”

In the last session, we reviewed Hanna’s musical selections. Rather than sit in the discomfort of another ending and departure, Hanna focused again on physical disappointments and somatic symptoms. She talked about her nausea and the lack of animal comforts in the hospital: there were no soft blankets, no hot showers, no personal iPods because of the suicide risk of cords, and no hugging. Plus her medications made her feel sicker. She said, “You know, nothing is nurturing here. I’m eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. There’s fruit, but my body doesn’t want to take anything in right now unless it has been softened for me. Most of all, everyday, I have this feeling that I want to go home and then I remember that I don’t have a home anymore.” Hanna’s memory of her grandmother’s house in Shanghai brought her comfort; she described falling ill as a child with chicken pox. Her grandmother brought her Chinese food and let her sleep all day, sometimes singing or reading aloud to Hanna. Hanna did not recall whether her grandmother sang traditional Chinese music, but she did vaguely remember having been able to play Chinese instruments as a child.

One of the last songs Hanna asked to have downloaded was Celine Dion’s “Vole.”<sup>53</sup> “What this song is saying,” Hanna remarked, “is that music is food. I could always listen to the pieces of music I liked and they would nurture me, even when I felt sick. If I could listen to my iPod in the hospital, I would think more clearly and would have some space. Music is very personal. It is I, with myself.”

### Analysis

What this research had intended to discover about music providing a means to help people experiencing psychosis to contain and express emotions, Hanna had been practicing for decades. She had practiced with Finn, a DJ who specialized in creating aesthetic emotional spaces with music. Hanna was teaching this writer about how to rhythmically attune<sup>54,55</sup> with her and how to listen deeply, and with a mind for catching primal and gestural details. Hanna invited this writer into her world, in careful increments, wherein music served a metabolizing function.<sup>6</sup> Hanna also, thereby, let this writer into her

process of encoding messy “smears” of feelings into technically perfect packages, and decoding them again while listening to music together. Hanna allowed this writer to enter into the realm of the unconscious and sometimes into the psychosis. In turn, Hanna also entered the unconscious of this writer.

Hanna kept her emotions secret from herself: already concretely contained in images of foreign landscapes (Paris); ex-lovers (Finn); incongruent, symbolic memories (stick beating); traditional Chinese foods (crab, lobster); and in pieces of familiar music (Alice in Chains’ songs), as well as embodied in the artists who performed those pieces of music (Layne Staley, Suzanne Vega). Hanna rightly anticipated an impending exhaustion of care and abandonment by her parents, which took the form of electroshock treatments and guns. She also had an intense longing—which translated into “stalking”—for a loving companion or that part of herself she had abandoned when she left Finn.

Hanna’s sense of self was intimately, and painfully, tied to her identification within a family. Lee<sup>56(p249)</sup> wrote, that in Chinese culture, “the family, rather than the individual is the ‘major unit of society,’” and part of a person’s core identity. Thus, to be banished from her home and to be labeled bipolar, were sources of grave shame and stigmatization.<sup>57</sup>

Hanna arrived in a psychotic paranoid rage. Offers of kindness or sensory comfort were interpreted as attacks. Showers flowed with cocaine water. Cafeteria food was poisoned. Hanna was traumatized by events and impressions she could and could not name.<sup>31</sup> According to Lee,<sup>56</sup> it is “common for the pain and unresolved conflict of one generation to be suppressed, passed on and expressed in the next generation.” Involuntary hospitalization was also traumatic because of social isolation and Hanna’s grief over lost freedom and agency.<sup>57</sup>

Hanna perceived an iPod as symbol and object, as a trusted source of solace prior to coming to the hospital. She did not seem suspect of the research sessions (only suspect and resistant to the entrance of the researcher into her secret world),<sup>52</sup> as long as Hanna could direct which pieces of music were chosen and to what depth conversation traveled. She returned again and again to the same songs and the same themes, including home, rationality versus emotion, abandonment, and spiritual transcendence over pain. She battled with these themes long before this writer and Hanna ever sat down with an iPod.

During the course of her stay at the hospital, Hanna reacted with great sensitivity to physical and emotional changes, such as moving to a different unit or saying good-bye to peers. Her somatic symptoms intensified whenever her sense of shame and grief was affected, which may have had cultural origins.<sup>58,59</sup> Throughout her hospitalization, Hanna seemed to be coming to terms with her parents’ disengagement from her.

### Analysis of Hanna’s Musical Preferences

Each of Hanna’s musical selections was a container as well as a communication. The main artists she selected conveyed various fragments of herself or an aspiration for a transcendent self. She selected Suzanne Vega for that singer’s cool rationality

and for Vega's ability to structure a dispassionate narrative around a terrifying emotional dilemma as she did in "Luka."<sup>46</sup> Vega returned the raw beta elements<sup>6</sup> of a violent urban scene softened, with melodic and rhythmic acuity, "I guess I'd like to be alone/with nothing broken, nothing thrown."<sup>45</sup> In "Tom's Diner,"<sup>45</sup> another of Hanna's favorite songs, Vega mitigated loneliness by precisely describing an urban scene, which Hanna aspired to master, "I'm pretending/Not to see them/Instead/I pour the milk." Music critic Holden<sup>60</sup> in a *New York Times* concert review referred to Vega's voice as conveying an "inviolable purity of heart tinged with mystery and a faraway melancholy." He further spoke of her "closely guarded inner life" and her "self-contained" and even "self-protective" melodies. Vega's steady cool and simple voice, leaning into the poetic logic of meter, had the capacity to keep wild emotions at bay, thus serving as Hanna's internal representation of a "good enough mother."<sup>61</sup> To sit with Hanna, listening to her beloved music was akin to being a containing *participant observer*<sup>62</sup> while in a container together, much like sitting on a lulling, steady train, sharing a lunch.

Hanna was equally attracted to a fragment of herself split off and reflected in the persona and pop lyrics of Lady Gaga. The singer commands artifice, by presenting herself as a "hyperbolically feminized woman" who rejects the world in which she would be considered "a freak."<sup>63,64</sup> Gaga indulges in and deconstructs the grandiosity of celebrity in her work. In "Paparazzi,"<sup>35</sup> she sings: "... don't stop for anyone, we're plastic but we still have fun." Hanna found a sense of cognitive containment in Gaga's lyrics by reintegrating her idealized memories/fantasies of young adulthood. Hanna could experience, in the music, a sense of being part of a tribe, which she craved.

The final musician Hanna drew comfort from, as if her primitive injuries could be split off into a waiflike shape, was Layne Staley of Alice in Chains. Hanna found Staley's voice uplifting and soothing, although he was a tortured artist who died from a heroin overdose in 2002. Austin and Dvorkin have described this "contradiction between the musical affect and the patient's affect" as a kind of resistance.<sup>52</sup> Hanna referred to Staley, her suffering twin, as "beautiful," or as the "perfect man." One music critic<sup>43</sup> described Staley's haunting voice as embodying "the despair of someone who had already given up, and for good." Staley's voice exuded woeful longing and loneliness, fueled by a simmering rage. He embodied Hanna's pain with "technical perfection." He sang, "Everyday something hits me all so cold/Find me sittin' by myself/No excuses that I know."<sup>39</sup>

Hanna's growth could be seen in her changing requests. For the last sessions, she requested Celine Dion's French recording of "Vole."<sup>53</sup> The song, dedicated to Dion's niece who had cystic fibrosis, seemed like a loving mother's plea that her suffering child transcend all earthly pain. "Vole"<sup>53</sup> was shaped and performed around the whispered rhythms of a lullaby, "Take your gentle happiness/Far too beautiful for this."<sup>53</sup> Dion's song recorded in French provided the nourishment Hanna craved.

## Rorschach Analysis: Pre-Music Session

### Rorschach

Initially, Hanna used great effort in processing information (Zf, 12) but tended to ignore the details of the inkblots (W:D:Dd, 9:7:0; W:M, 9:7). She was overanalytical in approaching the inkblots; this strategy became less effective as the images increased in complexity. She had a hard time staying focused and attentive and holding images in her short-term memory (DQ Sequencing; DQv, 0).

Reality testing, or translating and filtering her perceptions with environmental feedback, was difficult for Hanna. This was a global problem, rather than test-related (XA%, 0.63); it had the potential to reach the point of being a pervasive and disabling dysfunction (X-%, 0.38). Hanna showed evidence of bizarre thought processes (ie, Card III, Response 7: "People who are connected in that they are serial killers tend to like butterflies"). She was experiencing intensive need states (ie, longing for companionship, longing for mothering comfort) that intruded on her ability to reason (homogeneity). In this initial test, she felt quite exposed and vulnerable like the culturally significant symbol and food of a lobster (Minus Distortions).

As she revealed later in her critiques of songs, Hanna relied more on conceptual thinking and tended to deliberate before acting. She showed more introversive qualities; she preferred to override emotions in favor of logic. Her adherence to this style was fairly rigid, so she would be loath, for example, to attempt a trial and error risk (EB per, 4.7;  $\lambda$ , 0.14). This insistence on logic was much less effective when her thought processes were distorted. Hanna had trouble accepting external feedback and struggled to see the world from other perspectives (a:p, 10:0). She tended to ignore her own flawed logic, which led to eventual disorganization (HVI, 0; OBS, 0; MOR, 3). Her initial pretreatment Rorschach results showed a tendency to be gloomy, doubtful, and pessimistic, anticipating poor outcomes. She relied heavily on avoidance and intellectualization (Intellect. Index, 13) to keep from dealing directly with messy (smears of) feelings; for example, she remained technically distant, talking about how an artist used concrete and primitive manipulations such as in Card VI, Response 12, "It's a medium-sized cat, a mundane cat. And then she pressed on it" (Special Scores, M, 7; Quality of M, 3M-).

Hanna was initially in a state of chronic stimulus overload, losing control when demands exceeded her coping skills and stress tolerance (Adj. D, -1; Adj. es, 13). She internalized feelings of anxiety, sadness, tension, apprehension somatic disruption, and emotional deprivation to the point where she could not bear these feelings and needed to act quickly to dispel them as through hallucinosis (eb, 3:12). She felt unsettled by irritating emotions (Sum C', 3). She also found herself without friends or intimates and often retreated into isolation (Afr, 0.23). Hanna's complex psychological functioning impacted her behaviors, mood, and sense of stability (Blends, 10; EB, 7:1.5;  $\lambda$ , 0.14). This was especially hard when she perceived urgent threats to her resources (ie, impending loss of home).

Her early portrayal of her self in the inkblots was as being worthless and negative, with intensive concern for self-image (FD, 2; Sum V, 0; MOR, 3). She described usury relationships such as in describing an artist who tries to manipulate women (Human Content, 2). She tried to logically explain the colors (affects) of a shellfish but also showed anger and intolerance of the exposed shellfish's tenderness. Likewise, she wanted to control her own vulnerabilities (MOR, 3). She seemed to be preoccupied with the primitive aspects of herself, aspects that could leave an imprint, just as the exposed parts of shellfish covered with paint could make a print in Card VIII, Response 14, "The person did different colors but wanted to stay symmetrical. There's yellow paint, brown and green. It's the whole shell smeared and put on paper. The artist did this five times." She also expressed other feelings of ruin and manipulation (FM, 1; & m, 2).

Her initial inkblots also revealed interpersonal immaturity. She experienced predominantly superficial relationships and had depression about social failures (CDI, 5). She indicated strong dependency needs and a desire for others to tolerate her demands (Food, 4). Hanna found her urges for human companionship irritating. She wanted to be close to others but did not know how (Sum T, 7). Because of her abruptness and aloofness, others might avoid her (GHR, PHR 1: 7), thereby encouraging her tendency to stay, vigilantly, on the periphery (COP and AG, 0:0).

### Post-Music Session Rorschach

After 10 music sessions, Hanna showed a more economical approach to processing information (Zf, 7; Location Sequence). She was still overincorporative and highly analytic about details (Zd, 9.5); she struggled to hold images in memory (DQ Sequencing, 0). She continued to apply internal-based logical processes to externally vulnerable environments and situations, as in describing the inside of a crab in Card VIII, Response 13, "... grey here and green and an orange blend. This yucky part at the bottom is like eggs. She [the artist] paints those primarily pink" (Minus Distortion). She showed some improvement in seeing the world as others see it (Populars, 3).

Her allegiance to an introversive style remained strong, although she allowed a slightly larger space for trial and error (EB per, 11). Her thought processes were less rigid (a.p, 9:4), but she was more pessimistic and discouraged than in her pre-Rorschach scores (HVI, no; OBS, no; MOR, 4), most likely because of a lack of housing and family. Her intense and irritated feelings resulted in more concrete, cause-and-effect answers, but also more layered, nuanced answers as in Card IX, Response 15, "Sophisticated things are more sorrowful. It's ouchy to the brain," she said. Her special scores were more bizarre (Special Scores), and there was a greater presence of the artist doing technical, concrete things to shellfish (Quality of M, 4M-). Her stress tolerance increased somewhat, and she showed more capacity for volitional behavior (Adj. D, 2). She also externalized feelings more as in Card VII, Response 11, "These are parts of the leg of the dog. And this part is hair. It's not a very happy picture" (eb, 1:7).

She remained in great emotional disarray, due, most likely, to coping with her parent's announcement and her subsequent

living in limbo with no housing available. She continued to avoid emotional stimuli (lying in bed all day). Her answers showed increased complexity while her resources seemed thinner (ie, "She wanted to explore the crab. She wants it to be logical. And it has become more complex." Unusual complexity). Hanna felt confused by her emotions (Color Shading); her painful feelings had increased and further impacted her social functioning (Shading Blends).

Hanna was even more focused on her self-image by the end of the music sessions (FD, 3; SUMV, 0). Her morbid responses increased (MOR, 4). She described in Card III, Response 6 the drawing of a woman with a head like a dog that is pressed against the page (Human Content, 1); what she also seemed to describe were feelings that someone (perhaps this writer as researcher) was manipulating the primitive and cultural parts of her using artistic, abstract methods. She felt passive and not in control of what was happening (FM, 1; and m, 0). After the 10 music listening sessions, she also showed a decrease in her need states (Food, 2) and was less bothered by unfulfilled needs for closeness (Sum T, 5).

### Summary

It is important to re-emphasize here that this case study was intended to be exploratory and descriptive of how patient-selected music might serve as an affective container, and thereby help patients with psychosis put feelings into forms. These case studies were not intended to be a treatment intervention. In retrospect, the songs and artists that Hanna chose during the 10 sessions would be useful for a psychotherapist or other professional working with her long-term, such as helping to address any ambivalent feelings she might have over establishing an intimacy with a therapist.<sup>52</sup> Although Hanna tended to deflect intensive emotions, binding them in logic, or unconsciously channeling affect into somatic symptoms, music provided a protective shell for expressing affect appropriately and meaningfully.

One of the main discoveries of this research was that words might be too unbearable or frightening to utter for patients with psychosis, including unconscious communications. As a viable alternative, strong affects can sometimes be represented or spoken through musical choices. The music provided a familiar backdrop, and an aesthetic blanket, that the participant could wrap around herself while sitting with this writer.

In the course of sitting with Hanna, the transference<sup>65</sup> was marked by a persistent, insatiable aesthetic longing. Music and other artistic artifacts seemed inaccessible even when nearby, and always on the verge of disappearing. The concepts of home and family seemed less solid and gradually unraveled. The wish to save Hanna from the emptiness that opened between songs, and in the long hours of abandonment was strong. It seemed important to convey to her case manager and physician the importance of Hanna being placed in an urban group home, somewhat like the nurturing wombs of aesthetic richness described in Vega's New York City scenes.

Hanna's case illustrated that it was possible that listening to music could serve as a kind of play space or potential space

between fantasy and reality<sup>61</sup> wherein therapist and patient could explore emotions and promote prosocial interactions.<sup>66</sup> Music as a “third party” or “third area” could also help rebalance the communication between the right (sensory and affective) and the left (language and logical) hemispheres.<sup>5,67,68</sup> Hanna appeared to have had a perceived deficit of nurturing experiences (ie, stick beating) echoed by the more recent experiences of being banned from returning home. Music, as an auxiliary object, could help repair repeated experiences of neglect.

As noted by Norwegian researchers, Hug and Lohne,<sup>67</sup> the effect can be powerful for the patient when there is an auxiliary object (ie, a second therapist, MP3 Player) in the room. The patient can give and receive information without an intense, direct focus on the patient. Hug and Lohne<sup>67</sup> have called the inclusion of reflective space a “referential triangle.” In as much as it embodies a third person perspective, it also activates areas of the brain (ie, right inferior parietal lobe and the frontopolar cortex) which help integrate the left brain’s narratives with the right brain’s sensory, emotional information processing.<sup>5,68,69</sup> This might allow for an enhanced nonverbal connection with the patient that is essential for therapy.<sup>70,71</sup>

Arts-based therapies provide powerful modalities in helping to bypass defenses and denial in addressing significant issues with patients. For most of the participants, powerful unconscious forces had undone their capacity for organizing and sustaining emotion. Hanna remarked that communications seemed to be more organized and framed when centered around song lyrics or the musical elements of songs (ie, melody, rhythm).<sup>5,68,71</sup> Listening to music with lyrics also allows for the introduction and exploration of metaphors, upon which the patient can elaborate, but which the patient is not pressured to invent. The musician performer can also act as an inner observer, which a patient still in the wake of a psychotic episode may lack. Thus, the clinical therapist linking with the chosen musician and music<sup>72</sup> can help contain, express, and analyze emotional material and experiences until the patient, like the case of Hanna, described in this article, can return safely home again.<sup>72</sup>

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## Appendix

### Pre-Music Session Rorschach I Hanna

#### Card I

Response 1: I see a frog in the middle.

Interviewer (I): Show me what makes it look like a frog?

Responder (R): Here’s the face and the body.

I: Can you show me how you see the face?

R: When you smear it gets very messy.

Response 2: Here are 4 eagle prints.

I: Show me what makes them look like eagle prints?

R: Like it stepped here and here and here, and here.

#### Card II

Response 3: I see 2 dogs.

I: Show me how you see dogs?

R: How do you smear a dog? There are some smears with white holes or pockets here.

Response 4: Someone painted a formal home.

I: Show me what makes it look like a home?

R: It’s the painting of a castle.

Response 5: There are also smears of butterflies.

I: Show me the butterflies?

R: Right here and they’re broken up. That’s enough.

#### Card III

Response 6: I just see 2 stick figures of women.

I: Show me what makes it look like 2 figures?

R: It’s all very stylized. In the middle there is a butterfly.

I: Show me the women?

R: He drew 2 women. He must have used pointillism at that time.

Response 7: Over here is more like being inside the butterfly.

I: Show me the butterfly.

R: Well they broke it up or did it upside down. He must have been angry about the butterflies.

I: I’m still trying to see the inside of the butterfly.

R: People who are connected in that they are serial killers tend to like butterflies.

I: I’m still trying to see it.

Response 8: Well it’s more like an upside down butterfly. (turns over)

I: Show me what makes it look like it’s upside down?

R: I Just got one and then did that small one here.

#### Card IV

Response 9: This is a type of small dog. I don’t know the name of it but it’s a distinguished well-known dog.

I: Show me what makes it look like a dog?

R: It’s a show dog and anyway it’s smeared. A Rorsch dog.  
Response 10: Well it’s more like half a dog. She got 2 dogs and painted on one side of the painting. It’s very animal friendly.

I: Show me the 2 dogs?

R: The 2 dogs are identical. One is on each side here.

I: Can you show me what makes them look like they’re identical?

R: She carefully laid the dog down and pressed it, and see it’s a reprint here.

#### Card V

Response 11: This is a type of butterfly smeared.

I: Show me what makes it look like a butterfly?



R: It's a large butterfly. They have blown it up. Look at the lines here.

I: Could you show me?

R: Here's the head. There's black ink over it. There are differences in the ink depending on the way she pressed it. It really shows the butterfly.

#### Card VI

Response 12: It looks like a cat print smeared. It's medium sized and not very detailed.

I: Show me what makes it look like a cat print?

R: She wanted to do something artistic so she put black in for the body. The cat is movable.

I: I'm still trying to see the cat.

R: It's a medium-sized Siamese cat. A mundane cat. And then she pressed on it.

I: Pressed on it?

R: She took paper and closed it up so it's the same here and here.

#### Card VII

Response 13: This looks like part of crab's legs. They're smeared.

I: Show me what makes it look like a crab leg?

R: The way it's broken off. He dabs at it. And then another like replicates.

I: I am not following.

R: There are 2 but the one is a different shape. The shape is different on each side. And the angle is different.

#### Card VIII

Response 14: This looks like the inside of a crab. It's smeared. They didn't take the inside out.

I: Show me what makes it look like the inside of a crab?

R: The person did different colors but wanted to stay symmetrical. There's yellow paint, brown and green. It's the whole shell smeared and put on paper. The artist did this 5 times.

#### Card IX

Response 15: This looks like a lobster smeared.

I: What makes it look like a lobster?

R: Again, the body is a lobster. This is the head that was painted in detail. She drew parts of it. It took several times.

I: Show me the head?

R: Here's the head and the eyes. These are eyes and the antler things.

I: I'm still not seeing the head.

R: The lobster head is long.

#### Card X

Response 16: This looks like crab that's smeared and different colors.

I: Can you show me what makes it look like a crab?

R: He did an artistic project and then touched it up. It's a whole crab that's asymmetric.

I: Asymmetric?

R: But you can tell he touched up on it—you can tell here and here. It's more painful to the right. He analyzed it and did the best he could. He did 10 prints.

## Post-Music Session

### Rorschach II

#### Hanna

##### Card I

Response 1: I see 4 eagles.

I: Show me the 4 eagles.

R: It's a symbol. (She traces.) They're flying. These are the 4 eagles.

Response 2: This is a frog.

I: Show me what makes it look like a frog?

R: (She traces it.) It's an animated cultural kind of frog.

##### Card II

Response 3: It's 2 little white mini dogs.

I: What makes it look like dogs?

R: (She traces the forms.)

I: What makes them look white?

R: The kind of dog they are.

Response 4: Somebody drew a butterfly and cut it out into a print and then printed that.

I: Show me the butterfly.

R: It's here. And this is where it's cut down the middle.

Response 5: He drew a path going to a castle.

I: Show me the castle?

R: Up here.

I: And the path?

R: On the pathway is dotted with white spots.

That is covered with pink or peach.

##### Card III

Response 6: I see that someone has drawn a lady.

I: Can you show me what makes it look like a lady?

R: Well her head kind of looks like a dog.

I: Show me that?

R: Well, here's half a side and then it's pressed again on the other side.

##### Card IV

Response 7: A woman drew half of this and then drew a dog.

I: Show me the dog?

R: Right here. It's a white dog.

I: I'm still not seeing the dog.

R: Then she smeared one of them a little bit.

##### Card V

Response 8: It's a butterfly.

I: Show me what makes it look like a butterfly?

R: It's an extremely big one. (She traces it.)

I: Can you show me how that looks like a butterfly to you?

R: She used black, and when she did it was colorful.

##### Card VI

Response 9: Well, the motivation here is to draw a cat.

I: Show me what you mean by motivation.

R: Well she did one side and then smeared it.

I: And the cat?

R: She was looking at a cat.  
 Response 10: It's the face of a cat and the eyes.  
 I: Is this related to the cat you mentioned?  
 R: This is her anger and frustration over the cat.  
 I: Show me the anger and frustration.  
 R: It looks abstract and distant.  
 I: Can you show me some details?  
 R: Here are the whiskers, but she didn't want to put an expression on his face.

#### Card VII

Response 11: Again. She was thinking about her dog and the dog's leg.  
 I: Can you show me what makes that look like a dog?  
 R: These are parts of the leg of the dog. And this part is hair. It's not a very happy picture.  
 Response 12: This one is also a frustrating painting.  
 I: Show me what makes it frustrating.  
 R: It's irrational and annoying and it looks crazy.

#### Card VIII

Response 13: I like this one. It's very cognitive. It's the inside of a crab.  
 I: Show me what makes it look like the insides of a crab.  
 R: It's very logical. Look at all the different colors are symmetric over the top.  
 I: What colors do you see?  
 R: It's grey here and green and an orange blend. This yucky part at the bottom is like eggs. She paints those in primarily pink.

#### Card IX

Response 14: I have to say this is the influence of the crab leg.  
 I: Show me what makes this look like the influence of the crab leg.  
 R: She was looking and painted it on the right side. Then she smeared it.  
 I: Show me the smear and how you see it.  
 R: It's logical. It's orange here and here and it's not smeared anywhere else. It's a little annoying too.

Response 15: It's also a lobster.  
 I: Show me what makes it look like a lobster?  
 R: The peach part. It's peach and green here. She took the tail off but she left some of it on. Here are the eyes and this is where it's pressed on the other side.  
 I: The same image again?  
 R: It's complicated. Sophisticated things are more sorrowful. It's ouchy to the brain.

#### Card X

Response 16: A crab again. She took the crab and deadened it.  
 I: Show me what makes it look like a crab?  
 R: She was careful how she laid it out symmetrically on her palate.  
 I: Show me how you see the symmetrical layout.  
 R: Well it starts with the red crab. It's a natural layout.  
 I: Show me the natural layout.  
 R: It's complicated. She has a lot of experience with colors and details.

I: At the beginning you talked about the crab being deadened, can you show me that?  
 R: She wants to explore the crab. She wants it to be logical. And it has become complex.

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### Bio

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