

# Designing and implementing an improvisational music therapy programme in a music conservatoire. Analysis of participants' perceptions.

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**Abstract.** Conservatoire students face significantly frequent problems such as stage fright, anxiety, demotivation or creative blocks, that can hinder their musical development and put their health at risk. Music therapy can be a key tool in preventing and mitigating these factors, fostering student well-being. An improvisational music therapy programme was designed, in which nine students in their last years of Professional Music Studies took part in ten ninety-minute long sessions. Individual interviews and an anonymous questionnaire enabled us to analyse participants' perceptions on the process. Results obtained revealed very high levels of student satisfaction. Participants emphasized that the therapeutic process fostered socialization in the group, enjoyment through music, self-knowledge and listening ability.

**Keywords:** Music therapy, conservatoire, free music improvisation, creativity, wellbeing.

## [es] Diseño e implementación de un programa de musicoterapia de improvisación en un conservatorio de música. Análisis de las percepciones de los participantes.

**Resumen.** El alumnado de los conservatorios se enfrenta con relativa frecuencia a problemas tales como el miedo escénico, la ansiedad, la desmotivación o bloqueos en el proceso creativo, que pueden frenar su desarrollo musical y poner en riesgo su salud. La Musicoterapia puede ser una herramienta clave para prevenir y mitigar estos factores, en aras del bienestar de los estudiantes.

Diseñamos un programa de musicoterapia de improvisación en el que participaron nueve estudiantes en los últimos cursos de las Enseñanzas Profesionales de Música, asistiendo a un total de diez sesiones de hora y media de duración. Analizamos las percepciones de los participantes sobre el proceso mediante la realización de entrevistas individuales y la distribución de cuestionarios anónimos. Los resultados revelaron un muy alto nivel de satisfacción de los discentes, quienes destacaron cómo el proceso terapéutico favoreció especialmente la socialización en el grupo, el disfrute a través de la música, el autoconocimiento y la capacidad de escucha.

**Palabras clave:** Musicoterapia, conservatorio, improvisación musical libre, creatividad, bienestar.

**Summary.** 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical foundations and antecedents. 3. Design and methodology. 4. Results. 5. Discussion. 6. Conclusion. 7. Prospective and limitations. 8. Acknowledgements. 9. Bibliographic references.

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## 1. Introduction

Conservatory students receive professional training from an early age, having to face the work overload that combining general and music education implies (Ponce de León & Lago, 2009). A challenge in conservatories is fostering

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student motivation and well-being, despite the significant efforts that music education entails. Anxiety, especially in stage performance, is among the factors that can put students' health at risk. Numerous studies (Dalia, 2004; Zarza, 2012; Pignatelli, 2015; Ballester, 2015) show the relevance of stage performance anxiety in student musicians in Spain, a phenomenon that can have a serious repercussion in the experience lived by conservatory students and may even lead to dropouts.

Music therapy, integrated in curriculum subjects or in supplementary workshops and activities, such as the programme proposed and evaluated in this paper, can be a key tool for the sake of student wellbeing.

We experimented the multiple benefits of group music therapy (Davies & Richard, 2002; Gaardstrom, 2007; Oslé, 2007) ourselves during our own training processes as music therapists, improvising with the voice and all sorts of musical instruments in group music therapy sessions with other fellow musicians. The process allowed us to enjoy other ways of making music without the support of music notation, avoiding judgements and concerns related to instrumental technique. These are unfortunately extremely present in the lives of musicians, sometimes hindering enjoyment and professional development. Group music therapy helps to discover others and to know ourselves better through the music we propose, and how we respond to that of others. For many who have personally taken part in a group music therapy process as part of training, music therapy restored or intensified the joy and pleasure of making music, both with the main instrument and less familiar instruments, while also exploring the body and voice as sound sources.

It was considered worthwhile to offer a conservatory's student body the possibility of participating in a group music therapy process, analysing the benefits experimented by the participants and evaluating the suitability of these workplans as part of the music training received in these institutions.

Music therapy is one of the music-related careers that conservatory students in Madrid are less familiar with (Ponce de León & Lago, 2012). This could be due to the fact that, as opposed to other professional options such as performing, conducting, composition or teaching, music therapy is not directly related to the content of any of the subjects in the curriculum, nor is it significantly present in extracurricular activities planned by these institutions. The programme here also proposed bringing conservatory students into contact with Music Therapy as a discipline, as a professional career and as an area of knowledge with which any music specialist should be acquainted.

The recent creation of guidance departments in Spanish music conservatories could increase the presence of music therapy in these centres. The 2014-2015 academic year saw the creation of the first guidance departments in Madrid professional music conservatories. These departments include a teacher belonging to the board of educational guidance secondary school teachers, as head of the department, along with other members of the conservatory teaching staff that voluntarily wish to join. One of the guidance department functions is to design workplans that adequately respond to specific student needs. An example of such workplans is precisely the music therapy programme presented in this paper which was endorsed by the guidance department in the Conservatorio Profesional de Música Arturo Soria (Madrid). This may well be the seed of future music therapy programmes coordinated by guidance departments in other conservatories.

## 2. Theoretical foundations and antecedents

### 2.1. Improvisational music therapy and its benefits

The World Federation of Music Therapy (WFMT) proposed its most recent definition of music therapy in 2011:

Music therapy is the professional use of music and its elements as an intervention in medical, educational, and everyday environments with individuals, groups, families, or communities who seek to optimize their quality of life and improve their physical, social, communicative, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual health and wellbeing. (WFMT, 2011)

We can find students in specialised music education centres with disorders or particular circumstances that may require therapy. It is worth mentioning projects such as *Tots músics, tots diferents* (All musicians, all diverse) in Torrent's Conservatorio Profesional de Música (Valencia), that allowed students with special educational needs to access the elementary grades (Tomás, 2004) or the *Neuroredes* project of neural stimulation through music in Mérida's Conservatorio Profesional de Música Esteban Sánchez, addressed at people from the age of seven with intellectual disability (Ayuntamiento de Mérida, 2019). Nevertheless, our music therapy programme is addressed at all student musicians in professional conservatories. It is worth noting that music therapy can also be applied in non-clinical users, without any kind of diagnosis, as a self-development process (Wigram, Pedersen & Bonde, 2005) or for preventive purposes (Pellizzari & Rodríguez, 2005; Millanao, 2015).

A prior knowledge of music is not required to take part in a music therapy process, but it is not an obstacle either. Professional and student musicians are seldom participants in Music Therapy research and experiences, but they can also be suitable users of a therapy modality that works with the language of music, a language that comprises an essential part of these students' identities.

Our proposal is inspired by improvisational music therapy models (Bruscia, 1999) where interaction between patients and music therapist through music improvisation is a key activity. Music improvisation can be defined as musical expression which is “spontaneous, free and creative, by means of any musical instrument, the voice itself (singing) or the body (dance)” (Poch, 2011, p.160). Music improvisation in a music therapy process can contribute to fostering inner freedom, creativity, self-knowledge and knowledge of others, self-esteem, relationships with others and awareness of one’s surroundings (Poch, 2011).

As Lecourt (2005, p.19) points out, group creation and improvisation have the particularity of depending very directly on relations with others, on what is called ‘group dynamics’. Personal and musical implications of each group member during improvisations, responses to fellow members’ musical suggestions, the evolution of roles and the musical content of group improvisations itself are only some of the many elements that can be subject matter for analysis and discussion facilitated by the music therapist.

Having defined some of the basic relevant terms for our study, the need of an improvisational music therapy programme will be shown, based on the current legislation on music education in Spanish professional conservatories and furthermore highlighting its importance in preventing health problems related to musical practice. Also included is a revision of the studies showing the benefits of music therapy for professional and student musicians.

## 2.2 Improvisational music therapy and the objectives of Professional Music Studies in a Spanish conservatory

Apart from fostering students’ well-being, an improvisational music therapy programme, such as the one implemented in one of Madrid’s professional conservatories, can contribute to achieving curriculum objectives, something which would justify its presence in these institutions to an even greater extent. In the third article of Royal Law-Decree 1577/2006, which specifies the basic aspects of the Professional Music Studies curriculum in Spain, several of the listed objectives are closely related to the work carried out in our improvisational group music therapy programme.

The educational objective that can most clearly be linked to improvisational music therapy is j): “Cultivating improvisation and transposition as elements inherent to music creativity” (p.2854). This objective stresses the importance of supporting creativity in conservatories, an aspect which is present not only in subjects related to composition, but also in musical instrument learning. Improvisational music therapy offers the opportunity to develop improvisation skills, overcoming fear and insecurities when playing without the support of music notation. In later paragraphs it will be shown how the development of creativity can be one of the benefits of music therapy.

Given that this improvisational music therapy programme entails making music in groups in all sessions, using the voice, the body and instruments, and fostering discussion on these experiences, the following objective is fulfilled e): “Sharing musical group experiences in and outside the classroom that can enrich the emotional relationship with music through singing and playing instruments in a group setting” (p.2854).

Objective d) is also approached in the proposed music therapy process: “Forming a clear idea of one’s own possibilities and musical characteristics, individually and in relation to the group, with the necessary willingness to integrate as another member or to act as the head of the ensemble” (p.2854). Fostering self-knowledge is one of the main benefits that group music therapy can bring participants (Oslé, 2007). Improvisation experiences develop an awareness of preferences, strengths and limitations when using the voice, the body and all sorts of instruments, approaching different musical styles and playing different roles when interacting with others. The challenge of assuming different musical roles, also acting as “heads of the ensemble” in certain occasions, is also present in the music therapy process.

Music therapy can help students confront stage fright, as shall be discussed in later paragraphs, contributing to the achievement of objective l): “Playing in front of an audience with self-control, mastery of musical memory and communicative ability” (p.2854). Communicative ability is related to one of the objectives in improvisational music therapy according to Bruscia (1999), that being interpersonal communication.

Last of all, objective i), “Acquiring and demonstrating the necessary reflexes to solve eventualities that may arise in a performance” (p.2854) is part of the work carried out in group music therapy, given the high degree of unpredictability in a group improvisation session. We acquire those “necessary reflexes” as we discover and explore the ways in which to quickly respond to other participants’ musical suggestions in improvisation sessions. It is not surprising to find examples of research, such as that of Mendonca and Wallace (2007), that link music improvisation to emergency management.

The current legislation, therefore, justifies the work carried out in an improvisational music therapy programme, as an activity related to the conservatory curriculum. Individual and group improvisation is clearly an important activity, which can not only be run parallel to the curriculum, but should also be integrated into the different subjects taken by conservatory students.

## 2.3 Musicians’ health and well-being

Designing a music therapy programme specifically aimed at musicians would not make as much sense if this body of professionals did not present the health problems that literature puts into evidence. Paradoxically, despite music’s

health benefits, musicians are among the professionals with higher risks of mental health issues, according to research by Brodsky (1996) and Gabrielsson (1999), cited by Ahonen and Lee (2011).

Stage performance anxiety, belonging to DSM-V social phobia category, and approached in multiple studies (Dalia, 2004; Kenny, 2011; Zarza, 2012; Nagel, 2017), is one of the main problems that can put musicians' health at risk, but it is not the only one. Trondalen (2016) points out other problems such as stress and physical injuries, including hearing loss and nerve compression and entrapment. Blanco-Piñero, Pino and Martínez (2017) focus on musicians' postural quality and musculoskeletal health. Olson, Gooding, Shikoh and Graf (2016) pay special attention to hearing loss and the need of prevention measures during professional music training. The need of prevention is the origin of the proposal designed by Matei, Broad, Goldbart and Ginsborg (2018): a health education course addressed to conservatory music students.

As to musicians' mental health, it is worth mentioning the study carried out by Gross and Musgrave (2016), who conclude that having a career in music would triple the chances of suffering from depression. Dalia (2008) points out several aspects that can put musicians' emotional well-being at risk, such as the hours of solitude and the pressure of performing in front of an audience. Musical activity can even become an addiction, Musicorexia, a term coined by Dalia (2014), which is an additional risk for professional and student musicians.

The risks for psychological well-being can be greater for classical musicians in comparison to specialists in other musical styles, as suggested by the study conducted by Dobson (2010), where interviews to young classical musicians and *Jazz* musicians are analysed. The study highlights the pressure experimented by musicians, classical musicians in particular, due to the belief that a score should be performed aiming above all for maximum accuracy. The author stresses the importance of a greater presence of improvisation in a classical musician's training. Among the therapeutic effects of this practice, Dobson states that it can enhance creativity, mitigate feelings of frustration caused by a lack of autonomy and promote the reflection on accuracy expectations when performing a score.

As Spahn indicates (2004, cited by Ahonen & Lee, 2011) the fact that a musician often identifies with the profession increases vulnerability: a musical performance with results below expectations can make musicians feel that they have failed as human beings. Nevertheless, this is the same reason why music therapy can be especially effective for a professional musician, as a treatment to restore well-being and as a preventive measure, activating personal resources (Trondalen, 2016).

Research related to music therapy specifically addressed to musicians will be reviewed, with palliative and preventive aims for some previously discussed problems, particularly those issues related to mental health and emotional well-being.

## 2.4 Antecedents

While professional and student musicians are not the most frequent sector of music therapy patients, there has been a slight increase in research related to music therapy addressed to these users. Stage fright, burnout and creative blocks are the most frequent working areas that we can find in research on music therapy processes for musicians.

### 2.4.1. Music therapy and stage fright in musicians

The positive effects of music therapy as treatment in order to mitigate stage fright in musicians are shown in studies such as those by Maranto (1989), Montello, Coons and Kantor (1990), Martin (2007), Allen (2011), Haarde (2015) or Elías (2016).

The participants in the study carried out by Montello et al. (1990) were a group of musicians with significant anxiety levels. The experimental group took part in twelve weekly group music therapy sessions aimed at helping the musician be aware of how her body, mind and emotions interact during a performance and its preparation. All sessions included non-structured group music improvisation. The experimental group, as opposed to the control group that did not take part in any therapy process, experimented a reduction in performance-related anxiety, as well as improvements in self-image and perceptions of competence levels.

Haarde (2015) designed a programme in Jyväskylä University in Finland, addressed at students experimenting stage fright. Analysis of the five participants' verbal interventions throughout the twelve sessions of the process revealed five categories of benefits related to the music therapy group: participants were encouraged to express negative feelings towards stage fright, it provided an opportunity to have fun with music, it allowed the "privilege" of making mistakes and distancing from the role of musician, it offered a place to share significant memories of the past, and generated a safe space in which to play the role of a leader.

The absence of a significant number of studies on the use of music therapy techniques with patients experimenting stage performance anxiety is shown in the literature review carried out by Matei and Ginsborg (2017), who approach strategies for treating and preventing stage fright. Music therapy is not mentioned at any point in the paper. This is not the case in Zhukov's (2019) study, who reviews strategies aimed at confronting stage performance anxiety in musicians, establishing a difference between strategies for palliating physical symptoms and strategies for overcoming cognitive symptoms. References are made to music therapy as one possible strategy to manage cognitive symptoms, together with psychotherapy, cognitive restructuring, realistic goal-setting and systematic desensitization. The most



recent reference in this paper is the research conducted by Allen (2011), who proved the effectiveness of free improvisation as a palliative treatment for stage fright in student pianists. Zhukov (2019) considers that future research could focus more on music therapy as a treatment for music performance anxiety.

Stage performance anxiety is only one of the possible areas where music therapy can be used with professional and student musicians. Other areas in which music therapy could be applied providing beneficial effects for these users are commented on in the next section.

#### 2.4.2 Music therapy for treating creative blocks and burnout in musicians

Music therapy and other creative arts therapies, such as art therapy, can foster the development of creativity and can help overcome situations of emotional stress, creative inhibition or creative blocks in artists (Schapira, 2002; Formaino, 2011; Urrea, 2016).

Schapira (2002) points out the lack of creativity and enjoyment as a problem experimented by a significant number of professional musicians who “routinise their work and live their participation in orchestras or ensembles with the same boredom experienced by those who attend an office daily and carry out tasks that they find displeasing” (p.126). Dalia (2019) stresses the frequency with which musicians express feelings of tiredness and burnout, professionals that limit themselves to carrying out their tasks as musicians, without any satisfaction. These symptoms are related to “burnout syndrome”, a term coined by Freudenberger (1974) to name a consequence of chronic workplace stress, characterised by a feeling of physical, mental and emotional exhaustion. It has recently been recognised as an occupational phenomenon by the WHO and several studies show its incidence in professional and student musicians (Bernhard, 2010; Freeman, 2016; Teasley & Buchanan, 2016).

With the aim of helping musicians face circumstances like the ones commented on previously, which can hinder progress in their careers, Schapira (2002), together with music therapists Ardissonne and Hugo, developed *Musicoterapia para Músicos* (MTPM) (Music therapy for musicians). The author establishes three different working areas in MTPM: “intrapersonal areas” (p.129), related to corporal, emotional and intellectual issues, “action areas” (p.130), which can include difficulties in the creative process or in performing in front of an audience, and the “interpersonal area” (p.132), which would include work on solving or preventing conflicts between members of a musical ensemble.

In relation to the “interpersonal area” just mentioned, it is worth indicating the study conducted by Ahonen and Lee (2011), where a group music therapy process is analysed, whose participants are members of a professional string quartet. Free group improvisation and later discussion, facilitated by the therapist, comprised the essential elements in four sessions. The discussions that took place allowed the group to better understand how they functioned as a quartet. The group compared the quartet’s dynamics to a family with conflicts and significant aspects such as burnout were revealed.

Inspired by Schapira’s theories, Urrea (2016) also focuses on the development of creativity as a working area for music therapy processes addressed to musicians. In his research with a group of graduate and student musicians, specialised in composition and arranging, he found that participation throughout a process of twelve music therapy group sessions, supplemented by two individual sessions, helped to develop creativity. Sessions included moments of free improvisation, as well as more structured proposals.

#### 2.4.3 The benefits of free improvisation in musicians

It is worth focusing on free improvisation as a key element in music therapy processes that are beneficial for musicians. Exploring the benefits of improvisation, specifically in musicians, has been a central theme in research carried out by authors such as Allen (2011), Alonso (2014), Ladano (2016), Montello (2016) or Seabrook (2018).

Bruscia (1999, p.7), an undeniable keystone in improvisational music therapy, defines improvising as “the art of creating music in a spontaneous way when playing, rather than executing a previously written composition”. We could specify that free music improvisation, according to Ladano (2016), is that which tends to lack concrete rules and does not fit into any specific harmonic, rhythmic or formal framework. This absence of rules, which musicians are usually very accustomed to, is precisely a key factor in the therapeutic effects that music therapy can have for these users. Weintraub (2016, cited by Dalia, 2019, p.317) states that rules and norms can hinder play, something that characterises the first stages of musical activity and should not be lost during specialized training.

Alonso (2014) defines free improvisation as that which is not linked to a particular musical genre. She considers it to be an essential element in every student’s learning process. As well as the development of musical skills and listening ability, free improvisation educates in the “exploration and negotiation of other forms of social relations that are not based on hierarchy or competition” (p.17).

Ladano (2016) sustains that free music improvisation, apart from helping manage stage performance anxiety, provides musicians with the opportunity to take part in more creative forms of music making, helping to free and manage repressed emotions. She regrets that very few music education institutions include music improvisation in the curriculum and advocates that students of all ages and levels should have the possibility of practicing it, statements that support the creation of music therapy programmes like the one we propose.

Improvisation is a key element in the method Music Therapy for Musicians (MTM), developed by pianist, psychoanalyst and music therapist Montello in New York University, which has been evaluated in clinical studies and spread through seminars and workshops worldwide. The method combines cognitive-behavioural techniques with others associated with creative music therapy (Montello, 2002). Montello (2016) presents a music therapy programme that has the aim of mitigating anxiety, as well as facilitating enjoyment and efficacy in performance. Improvisation, as an activity in group music therapy, allows music students to experiment the roles and relationships that can exist in a musical context, inviting them to experiment especially those that may seem threatening and unpleasant. Students can learn to trust their musical intelligence and creativity, trusting their fellow musicians as well. According to Montello (2016), group improvisation empowers musicians, helping them to be more assertive and to take risks.

The benefits of improvisation for musicians and artists in general are also analysed in a study carried out by Seabrook (2018). The author refers to the term “clinical improvisation” as a form of improvisation at the service of users’ health and well-being in which a music therapist acts according to therapeutic principles. Seabrook held a single session with the 18 participants in the study, some individually and others in group, later interviewing the users about the experience. The results of interview analyses revealed some of the benefits and challenges that clinical improvisation can entail for classical musicians. Participants highlighted positive aspects, such as the opportunity to make their own music, without the background of their main instrument, reconnecting with the sources of music. They considered that this sort of experiences could foster the development of musical skills, including auditory development and performance skills. Some of the mentioned challenges for the musician were the feelings of frustration and anxiety, together with negative evaluations concerning their own musical execution and aesthetics.

#### **2.4.4 Receptive music therapy for musicians**

While most research on music therapy for musicians implies the user’s active participation, as in the studies aforementioned, we can also find examples of passive or receptive music therapy, that is to say, processes where users listen to selected music, be it recorded music or music performed by the therapist, but without taking an active part in its production. An example of receptive music therapy is Guided Imagery and Music (GIM), created by Bonny, that uses previously programmed excerpts of recorded classical music. Users describe the images evoked during listening, analysing the experience afterwards with the music therapist. Another example is Cid-Poch’s technique of “musical journeys”, where patients are invited to “travel” with their imagination, with the help of postcards and posters representing specific places, descriptive music or dances from the proposed geographical locations, with the occasional support of poetic descriptions (Poch, 2011).

Examples of receptive music therapy for musicians can be found, such as the one presented by Trondalen (2016), who suggests the use of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM), in particular the R-oGIM modality (Resource-oriented), to foster health, as well as personal and professional development in musicians. Participants in the study conducted by the author revealed, among other effects, a strengthening of professional identity. Grocke (2005) and Martin (2007) also show examples of GIM as a treatment for stage performance anxiety in musicians. Kim (2008) observed the significant reduction in stage performance anxiety in a group of student pianists that took part in a music therapy process based on guided imagery and progressive muscle relaxation with music.

### **3. Design and methodology**

We will now describe our proposal of a music therapy programme addressed at a music conservatory’s student body and the study carried out based on participants’ perceptions at the end of the process.

#### **3.1. Population and therapeutic space**

This study was implemented in Madrid’s Conservatorio Profesional de Música Arturo Soria. The experience analysed took place from September to December 2019.

Nine students in fifth and sixth years of Professional Music Studies, divided into two groups, voluntarily took part in the study. Participant ages ranged from 17 to 20, with the exception of a retired woman. The instrument “majors” of participants were the following: Flamenco singing, Harpsichord, Bassoon, Oboe (2), Percussion (2), Saxophone and Viola. Participants attended weekly ninety-minute sessions, either Tuesdays 16h to 17,30h or Thursdays 19,30h to 21h, depending on the chosen group. These were counted as attendance credit hours in elective subjects.

The classroom where the sessions were held included a computer, projector, sound equipment, a baby grand piano, an electric piano, a flamenco box drum, barred instruments and other small percussion instruments.

#### **3.2. Programme objectives**

Throughout the music therapy programme sessions were planned to help users in the following aspects:

- Reaching a greater state of well-being
- Increasing self-knowledge
- Fostering relationships with fellow members of the group
- Improving listening ability
- Increasing motivational levels towards musical studies
- Enjoying any musical activity to a greater extent, in particular, performing music with their main instrument
- Reducing anxiety levels
- Boosting creativity

Data collection in our study would enable us to analyse to what extent participants did in fact perceive these benefits or if any other effects were observed throughout the programme.

### 3.3. Session design

All sessions followed a similar structure:

- Session opening: We began with an informal discussion on our past week in the conservatory, our level of energy and current emotional state, reflections and comments on the previous session, and other aspects.
- Structured activities: We carried out improvisation activities where participants were given previous instructions. An example of these were the following:
  - a. Group music improvisation as a response to visual stimuli or concepts
  - b. Improvisation of a musical story with sound effects based on our experiences in the conservatory
  - c. Music improvisation based on fragments of repertoire that was being worked on by participants in their respective instrument lessons
- Free group improvisation (without previous instructions): In the first phase of the programme students improvised with the voice, the body and small percussion instruments. Participants started to use their main instruments from the sixth session onwards.
- Discussion: Sensations and reflections on the improvisation and other aspects of the session were shared in the group.

### 3.4. Data collection

When the programme ended, all participants took part in individual semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with the aim of gaining deep insight into their perceptions on the music therapy progress. A provisional script was designed for the interviews focusing on the possible benefits of the programme as perceived by the participants, the progress and learning observed throughout the process, the extent to which initial expectations were fulfilled and improvement suggestions for future editions. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

Given the limited number of participants, we considered that in-depth interviews would be the most suitable procedure for data collection. Nevertheless, these were supplemented with a short survey that participants answered anonymously. Starting points for the design of our survey were several examples of student satisfaction surveys (Gento & Vivas, 2003; Medrano & Pérez, 2010) and for the measurement of student well-being (Vera, Quijada & Grubits, 2013; Jurado, 2017). An *ad hoc* questionnaire was used with closed-ended questions related to participants' experience. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree) was applied, where each item was related to a specific objective of the music therapy programme. In the final item participants could indicate to what extent they would recommend the programme to other conservatory students. Several open-ended questions were included, inviting students to state if they had perceived any other benefits, beside the ones suggested in previous items, to suggest improvements and to add further comments on the process. The questionnaire was sent to three experts in educational guidance, music and music therapy, for its validation before distributing the document. All data collection procedures took place after obtaining informed consent.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Quantitative analysis

The following table (Table 1) shows statistical analysis of answers to closed-ended questions in the questionnaire, which correspond to the programme's specific objectives.

Table 1: Answers to closed-ended questions in participants' questionnaires

	<b>Mean (0-5)</b>	<b>Standard deviation</b>	<b>% Totally agree (5)</b>	<b>% Quite agree (4)</b>	<b>% Neither agree nor disagree (3)</b>	<b>% Quite dis- agree (2)</b>	<b>% Totally disagree (1)</b>
Music therapy sessions have helped me...							
1.Reach a greater state of well-being	3,75	0,707	12	50	38	0	0
2.Know myself better	4,13	0,835	37	38	25	0	0
3.Relate to other members of the group	4,50	0,535	50	50	0	0	0
4.Increase my listening ability	4,34	0,744	50	37	13	0	0
5.Increase my levels of motivation towards Music studies	4,00	0,756	25	50	25	0	0
6.Better enjoy performing with my main instrument	3,88	0,641	12	63	25	0	0
7.Better enjoy music in general	4,63	0,518	62	38	0	0	0
8.Reduce my anxiety level	3,75	1,035	25	37	25	13	0
9.Develop my creativity	3,75	0,707	12	50	38	0	0
I would recommend other music conservatory students to take part in this music therapy programme	5,00	0	100	0	0	0	0

We can observe that, in each of the nine areas of help considered in the questionnaire, more than half of the participants quite agreed or totally agreed that the sessions had certainly provided the specified benefit. Therefore, results reveal that the majority of participants perceived benefits in all of the areas considered.

Two areas stand out in which all participants perceived that the programme proved helpful:

Item (n° 3) fostering relationships with fellow members of the group, with which 50% of participants totally agreed and 50% quite agreed.

Item (n° 7) increasing general enjoyment through music as well, with which 62% totally agreed and 38% quite agreed.

The next areas with greater percentages of agreement and therefore areas where students perceived benefits with greater clarity were:

Item (n° 4) an increase in listening ability, with which 50% of participants totally agreed and 37% quite agreed.

Item (n° 2) an increase in self-knowledge, with which 37% totally agreed and 38% quite agreed.

The fact that 100% of participants stated total agreement when recommending the programme to other students (last item in the questionnaire), is proof of the high level of participant satisfaction.

## 4.2 Qualitative analysis

Once the individual interviews were transcribed, a manual qualitative analysis of each one was initiated. Units of meaning were identified, which did not necessarily need to be of similar sizes. These were categorised by assigning codes to each one. When classifying the contents facilitated by participants there were no preestablished categories and these emerged from the data segments themselves. Nevertheless, it was anticipated that several of these categories would correspond to the different benefits of the programme as perceived by the participants, given that the initial script for the interviews focused specifically on these aspects.



The following tables (Tables 2a-2e) present the main categories and subcategories established in our analysis, grouped by themes, together with representative examples from the transcriptions and the corresponding frequencies of appearance. The categories which appear in the tables are the following:

- Areas in which the programme was considered helpful (Table 2a), including benefits related to the so-called “intrapersonal areas”, “action areas”, “reception areas” and “interpersonal area”
- Structured activities mentioned by participants (Table 2b)
- Reasons why students decided to participate (Table 2c)
- Improvement suggestions (Table 2d)
- Other views expressed by participants (Table 2e)

Table 2a: Analysis category: areas of help (AYU)

Category	F	Examples
<b>Areas where the programme has been considered helpful (AYU)</b>	<b>88</b>	
AYU: Acknowledgement of the benefits of the programme without specifying a specific area	6	‘it did me very very well, it did us all very well’ (P01)
<b>(AYU) Benefits: Intrapersonal Areas</b>		
AYU_relaj: Relaxation and elimination of tension in sessions	8	‘you freed yourself a little from all that stress you had accumulated’ (P06)
AYU_evas: The session as a moment of evasion	2	‘a subject that did me very well to forget everything, to take a break’ (P01)
AYU_autoes: Improvement of self-esteem	8	‘accept that I may be capable of doing more things than I thought I was’ (P04)
AYU_autosup: Self-improvement, confronting new challenges and risks	4	‘I have tested myself in many senses and I have liked that’ (P06)
AYU_autoco: Self-knowledge	3	‘it has made me become aware that there are things about myself that still surprise me’ (P03)
AYU_motiv: Fosters motivation towards music	3	‘it helped me remember the excitement with which I started, being able to have it more in mind’ (P05)
AYU_apMT: Learning about Music therapy as a discipline	1	‘I’ve learned things about this topic that I didn’t know of: approaches, possible sessions’ (P01)
<b>(AYU) Benefits: Areas of action</b>		
AYU_miedo: Overcoming fears and insecurities	9	‘It helps doing away with a lot of insecurities, specially since they are not our instruments and they are easy to handle’ (P03)
AYU_desinh: Disinhibition, overcoming shame and shyness	4	‘overcoming embarrassment in these first exercises... it was like “I’m going out of my comfort zone”... in the end, it wasn’t there any more’ (P09)
AYU_exp: Fosters emotional expression	2	‘I think that many times I don’t put a name to the feelings I have regarding music, or things that make me feel good or bad’ (P07)
AYU_creat: Fosters free and creative expression	3	‘it is very good for creativity and imagination’ (P02)
<b>(AYU) Benefits: Reception Areas</b>		
AYU_escu: Increases listening ability	5	‘I’ve learned to listen, I’ve learned to observe’ (P01)
AYU_conoc: Helps to know fellow group members better	4	‘it has helped me know more about their personality in greater depth than if we were simply taking Solfege or Harmony class’ (P03)
AYU_apert: Openness to other points of view	2	‘to focus more on what others do, not just what I do, being able to be open to other opinions’ (P05)
<b>(AYU) Benefits: Interpersonal Area</b>		
AYU_relac: Fosters relationships between participants, the integration of group members	15	‘to integrate with other people, with the rest, to see a union, a closer communication’ (P02)
AYU_prob: Offers a space where problems can be shared	2	‘to know that I’m not the only one that goes through rough patches, that it happens frequently and there are always tools’ (P07)

<b>AYU_reflex:</b> Acknowledgement of the importance of reflection and group discussion as a source of benefits	4	‘the moment of reflection after the activity is key to become aware that the activities do help us’ (P04)
<b>AYU_grupo:</b> Acknowledgement of the group as a source of help	4	‘seeing the rest, who also face challenges and evolve, well that does you good too, and it encourages you...’ (P02)

Table 2b: Analysis category: structured activities (ACT)

Category	F	Examples
<b>Structured activities mentioned by participants (ACT)</b>	18	
<b>ACT_vocal:</b> Emotional expression through vowels	2	‘it’s a very good formula, because it’s really like trying to express yourself, but from gestures and vocal exaggeration, something that we usually do, but with words, not just a vowel’ (P01)
<b>ACT_repre:</b> Representing the contents of a phrase or painting through music	6	‘I found it very curious and useful, the activity in which we had to try to describe or represent a phrase or image with music’ (P09)
<b>ACT_espiral:</b> Introducing musical motifs in spiral form	1	‘introducing new musical motifs to what my colleagues did, in spiral manner’ (P04)
<b>ACT_agrup:</b> Making groups of different number of members according to the music and sharing challenges/ past experiences with the rest	1	‘that one where we grouped ourselves in pairs, threes and sharing experiences...’ (P07)
<b>ACT_cuento:</b> Create a story with sound effects on an episode related to the conservatory	3	‘there were people more emotionally involved [...] and they tried to elaborate the story more seriously’ (P03)
<b>ACT_relaj:</b> Relaxation and guided visualization related to our musical history	2	‘the visualization... it caught me in a moment where we were a little nervous, we had tests... it was a moment of relief’ (P08)
<b>ACT_song:</b> Songwriting. Collective composition of a song for our own comfort	1	‘I didn’t like the songwriting session as much, but because I’m a maniac. I don’t like sharing feelings with other people, and having them shape these’ (P03)
<b>ACT_pref:</b> Preference of structured activities over free improvisation	2	‘I have always preferred with instructions. I took a stronger grip there’ (P02)

Table 2c: Analysis category: reasons why students participated in the programme (PAR)

Category	F	Examples
<b>Reasons why students decided to participate in the music therapy programme (PAR)</b>	9	
<b>PAR_intMT:</b> Interest and curiosity about music therapy	7	‘Music therapy, since always, I have liked it, it’s something that has always caught my attention’ (P06)
<b>PAR_asist:</b> The fact that attendance counted as hours of attendance in elective subjects	1	‘attendance, it counted’ (P03)
<b>PAR_docente:</b> Teacher responsible for the programme	1	‘the fact that you were the one offering it, because I knew the degrees you had’ (P01)

Table 2d: Analysis category: suggestions for improvement (MEJ)

Category	F	Examples
<b>Improvements suggested for future editions (MEJ)</b>	21	
<b>MEJ_promo:</b> Better promotion and information on the programme offered	3	‘Try to promote it more’ (P01)
<b>MEJ_grupo:</b> Participation of a larger number of members in the group	3	‘simply a larger group’ (P01)
<b>MEJ_tiempo:</b> Longer duration of the programme and/or sessions	8	‘Time. I think it ends up being short. It’s a topic and an environment that has to be developed a lot, there are many things left to do’ (P09)

<b>MEJ_repetir:</b> Repeating activities throughout the programme	3	‘there were things you would like to do again, to repeat with another person’ (P06)
<b>MEJ_sincono:</b> Creating groups of participants that do not know each other previously	1	‘people that did not know each other at all’ (P09)
<b>MEJ_reflex:</b> Introducing more activities for reflection on our thoughts and strategies when facing musical situations	1	‘I would go deeper into what we did one day, before the song, that of “Frustris” [name of a character in the musical story]’ (P05)
<b>MEJ_relaj:</b> Introducing more relaxation and visualization activities	1	‘give relaxation more importance, relaxation but while thinking about something’ (P05)
<b>MEJ_activ:</b> More structured activities	1	‘More structured games. It’s not that they have come short, but I have really liked them’ (P03)

Table 2e: Other views expressed by participants (Analysis category: VAL)

Category	F	Examples
<b>Other views expressed (VAL)</b>	26	
<b>Val_grupo:</b> Positive comments on the group of participants	10	‘I’ve liked that there has been a lot of respect between group members’ (P03)
<b>Val_prog:</b> Positive comments concerning the programme	9	‘a subject that, apart from enjoying it, and learning a lot, has been helpful to me’ (P01)
<b>VAL_rigidez:</b> Comments on the rigidity of the educational context experienced by participants, and specifically in the conservatory	4	‘looking for other ways of teaching and understanding music that go beyond what is stipulated, specially everything about the conservatoire. There is a lot of rigidity and I think it’s very necessary to find another approach’ (P07)
<b>Val_impro:</b> Comments on free improvisation as an activity	2	‘Pedagogically, I found that moment of freedom very interesting’ (P08)
<b>Val_disfrute:</b> Reference to enjoyment in sessions	2	‘in practically all improvisation sessions, in the end, I had a feeling of “ow, I loved it”, a tingling throughout the body’ (P03)

Responses to open-ended questions in the questionnaire were in line with the categories derived from the interview analysis, but they allowed us to qualify some aspects, as will be discussed in the following sections.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Benefits of the programme: areas of help

Participants perceive that the programme has helped them in their development and learning, pointing out several areas (AYU category) that were grouped into the following subcategories (see also table 2a in the precedent section):

In the first place, the programme has beneficial effects for them as individuals in tension reduction, an increased motivation towards music, as well as greater self-knowledge and an increased self-esteem. This subcategory is related to the “intrapersonal areas” in Schapira’s MTPM theory (2002, p.129). It is worth remembering that a better self-image of participants and a better perception of their degree of competence was an effect that Montello et al. (1990) already perceived as a result of applying their programme of music therapy for musicians. Several references to this benefit are supported in participants’ views:

[I have learned to] accept that I may be capable of doing more things than I thought I was (participant 04)

Greater self-esteem can favour creativity, a benefit that was pointed out in Urrea’s research (2016). Both aspects appear related in some of the students’ comments:

I always have the feeling that I am not very creative [...] in these lessons I’ve become aware that I can do it (participant 06)

Another subcategory of benefits can be considered that imply group presence and participant role as sender of messages: the free, creative, uninhibited expression of emotions, by overcoming possible fears or insecurities. This would correspond to “action areas”, according to Schapira’s theories (2002, p.130). The importance of destroying

fears and changing, which the participants succeeded in doing, is mentioned by Dalia (2019) as one of the keys for success not only in music and but also in life. Adapting to new realities is fundamental in order to progress, something for which improvisational music therapy can prove to be valuable training, given that participants are invited to take risks in every session, by using new instruments and assuming new roles or attitudes. The participants' views in this category also coincided with Montello's (2016) observations, that improvisation helps musicians take risks and furthermore empowers them.

A third subcategory corresponds to attitudes and knowledge development of the individual as receptor in relation to the environment: an enhanced listening ability, openmindedness to other ways of thinking and a greater awareness of fellow group members. This subcategory is referred to as "reception areas", and this improvement in the ability to listen and respond to others' suggestions, due to participation in improvisation activities, is related to the research carried out by Mendonca and Wallace (2007). They consider it very useful to explore the processes that take place in music improvisation in order to design decision-making procedures in emergency situations. Listening ability is, in fact, considered by Alonso (2014) as the most important aspect in improvisation, a way of listening that gradually becomes more "refined", facilitating a better response and efficient use of relevant information at every moment.

Finally, and as a result of all of the above, the bond between the participants and their environment, this bidirectional communication, becomes stronger: the process fosters the integration of group members and facilitates a safe space to share problems and success. Participants themselves acknowledge the importance of the group as a source of help, pointing out that the reflections and discussion were fundamental elements for their own progress.

It is precisely this last subcategory, linked to the "interpersonal area", according to the categories established by Schapira (2002, p.132), where most of the participants' comments belong. Aspects mentioned by participants themselves, such as the knowledge we acquire from other group members, the level of trust created in the group, along with the enhanced listening ability and openness to other points of view from each group member, are all advantages for the work to be carried out in any musical ensemble. All of the above can be related to the benefits of the music therapy process undertaken by the string quartet in the study by Ahonen and Lee (2011). Non-musical aspects came to the surface, which needed to be worked on in order to guarantee the ensemble's optimal functioning. One of the participants in fact suggested the analogy with a chamber music ensemble:

It's like a chamber music ensemble that starts without its members knowing each other at all [...] that non-verbal communication that awakens in musicians that work together [...] a pretty cool complicity has been created (participant 08)

The abundance of positive comments (VAL category) appears not only in relation to the programme, but especially so in relation to group members. It reveals the importance of bonding with the other participants and achieving a therapeutic space that provides safety and trust in order to take risks and to be able to progress in each session:

A space where we could talk about how we felt about music and about ourselves, with self-confidence... we felt sheltered in the classroom... (participant 04)

The benefits of the sessions reflected in the responses to the questionnaire's open-ended questions are in line with the categories extracted from the interview analyses. Other remarks are the possibility of working with instruments with which participants were not familiar, the fact that music was linked to other arts, and the possibility of reflecting on positive and negative feelings regarding the conservatory and music education. Cooperation and teamwork are again the most frequent remarks within the wide range of positive effects that are commented on.

The emphasis made by participants on cooperation as a fundamental aspect of group music therapy can be related to research pursued by Burova (2019), who highlights the potential of group music improvisation in promoting social cooperation. The author suggests that improvisation could be a teaching strategy to educate in democracy and creating an egalitarian society.

The fact that participants have given so much importance to social bonds as a consequence of the music therapy process may suggest the student need to counterbalance the loneliness of musical training and practice which, as Dalia (2019) suggests, can interfere with other facets of life such as social contacts. The music therapy programme could mitigate this isolation to a certain extent, providing a "safe space", as participants describe it, where they can share, experiment and communicate, both musically and verbally.

## 5.2 Free group improvisation and its effects

In similar terms to those expressed by Ladano (2016), participants in our study advocate the importance of free improvisation, an activity which contrasts with the rigidity of certain traditional approaches to music education in conservatories:

Other ways of teaching and understanding music that go beyond what is stipulated, especially everything about the conservatory. There is a lot of rigidity and I think it's very necessary to find another approach (participant 07)



We are used to following a score and we are used to following someone who gives us directions on how to play that score [...] we are used to being sheep, following limits imposed upon us (participant 09)

Linked to this idea of rigidity is the obsession with accuracy, the tensions caused by the expectations of having to achieve a technically flawless performance, aspects that, as Dobson (2010) points out, can be put into perspective with free improvisation. Some participants stress how the programme's activities resulted helpful in this sense:

Doing away a little with that fear of having to do everything perfect and not having to fail (participant 01)

Remarks like these are in line with the "privilege of being allowed to make mistakes", a benefit observed by participants from the music therapy group in Haarde's study (2015). Improvisation is perceived as a way to counter-balance the rigidity highlighted by participants:

We tend to play it safe, doing something that we have already studied and that we know perfectly, not getting out of that bubble that we have created for ourselves [...] the improvisations we did [...] it was getting out of that bubble (participant 09)

"Getting out of the bubble", as expressed by this participant, getting out of that rigidity of rules and imposed norms, is a way of restoring "play" (Weintraub, 2016, cited by Dalia, 2019), the enjoyment of making music for ourselves, without the fear of failing. Allowing mistakes is necessary in the creative process, as Alonso (2014, p.29) defends: "errors are something valuable because they are usually a source of inspiration [...] they will take us to creative and ingenious solutions".

Getting away from their main instrument, at least in the initial sessions of the programme, allowed students to focus on the idea of expressing, communicating, reconnecting with the sources of music, as expressed by Seabrook (2018) when commenting on the benefits of free improvisation. That is also the way some participants feel:

It helps to get rid of many insecurities, especially since they are instruments different to ours [...] that freedom of starting with something, and since you don't know what is right or wrong, you don't care, and it's a very good environment for experimenting (participant 03)

Using the main instrument often requires the learned techniques and practice, which is demanding, causes pressure and a sense of responsibility for "correctness":

Not thinking, "I should be able to do this well because it's my instrument [...] I really liked to think that I can do it, without being put under pressure (participant 05)

I master the instrument, because I have been playing it all my life, but that is what I was most afraid of... since it was a melodic instrument there was like more pressure... and in the end I quite liked it. I think I have freed myself (participant 06)

In fact, it is interesting to observe the moment in the programme where participants were invited to use their own instruments for the first time. It was rather a setback in the process. Fears and insecurities reemerged:

Later on, with our own instruments ... it was like starting again (participant 07)

The task at that moment consisted precisely in not losing the feeling of freedom, rediscovering "our" instruments, which comprise a fundamental part of our identity, almost as if they were a prolongation of our bodies. The support of the group was decisive in overcoming the difficulties at this key moment in the process:

The idea of including it [the main instrument] in an improvisation... I was afraid of how it was going to be, but seeing the relationship with the group, it wasn't quite so difficult (participant 01)

The opportunity of "rediscovering" music and their instrument, the feeling of "starting again", as stated by one of the participants, could be considered a reason why a music therapy programme such as this one can contribute to preventing burnout, which unfortunately, as commented on previously, can interfere in the musician's professional development (Schapira, 2002; Bernhard, 2010; Freeman, 2016; Teasley & Buchanan, 2016; Dalia, 2019). It is all about helping students to continue exploring their musical instrument with the same excitement experienced on the first day. As Alonso (2014, p.137) states, a musician should "approach his or her instrument the same way a child plays with a new toy [...] to master it little by little and to grow to see it as a wonderful tool, full of possibilities".

## 6. Conclusions

Of all the objectives listed when designing this music therapy programme (section 3.2), participants consider that enhancing the enjoyment of making music is one of the aims that was fulfilled to a greater extent. Restoring or intensifying that enjoyment when taking part in musical activities is already a significant achievement in the context of conservatories where, as already mentioned, the pressure and work overload can affect student motivation and well-being.

According to participants' views, the objective of fostering relationships with the fellow students in the group was also clearly attained. The process contributed to socialisation in the group and to creating a climate of trust, respect and safety. Participants themselves stressed the importance of the group as a source of help and support in the process. Moreover, during the moments of reflection and discussion regarding the activities that were carried out, these were considered essential elements of the therapeutic process.

According to the results obtained, participants also perceived the achievement of the remaining objectives planned for the programme. The process helped them to achieve greater self-knowledge, boosting their self-esteem and allowing them to discover and enhance their creativity. The students also perceived that the programme improves listening ability. To a certain extent, the process contributes to reducing anxiety and reaching a state of greater well-being.

As mentioned in preceding sections, participants highlighted that taking part in the programme supported expressing themselves musically with greater freedom, as well as overcoming insecurities and blocks. These aspects are fundamental in their development as musicians and people. Without a doubt, factors being considered are those that are essential in guaranteeing a suitable learning process and to prevent problems that are relatively frequent, such as stage performance anxiety.

Even though participants' own perceptions have been focused on throughout this study, also verified was their progress through observations carried out. The organicity of musical suggestions, as well as cohesiveness and complicity in the groups, increased as the weeks advanced. All participants were able to face their own challenges, showing a predisposition and attitude of self-improvement that were key in their progress. To a greater or lesser extent, all participants learned something about their main instruments and their relationship with them, there being a "reconciliation" or rediscovery in some cases.

Participants' positive comments, particularly in the unanimous recommendation of the programme to other students, reveal the participants' high level of satisfaction with the improvisational music therapy programme and confirms the need to offer experiences of this sort in music conservatories in order to adequately respond to student needs as future professionals and human beings.

## 7. Prospective and limitations

In future studies it would be advisable to study the effects of a long term programme, with sessions distributed throughout an entire academic year at least. Participants themselves agreed when suggesting a greater dedication of time as an improvement to the programme.

The present study focused on the participants' subjective perceptions at the end of the process. In future studies it would be interesting to gather the perceptions of their teachers and families throughout the process. In view of the literature examined and student perceptions, data collected could pay special attention to anxiety levels and other aspects that seem especially relevant in this population.

Some participant observations stressed the importance of discussions and moments of reflection and dialogue which followed improvisations, acknowledging that they were decisive in provoking a change in them. It would be worthwhile to compare the effects of the music therapy programme with the effects of carrying out the proposed sequence of musical activities in a control group, without the subsequent moments of dialogue and reflection.

Almost a decade ago, conservatory teachers, as well as students and families, indicated the lack of a guidance counsellor in professional conservatories (Ponce de León & Lago, 2012). The response to this demand came in 2013 with Madrid's initiative of creating the first guidance departments, including professional guidance counsellors among the staff. The study presented in this paper provides data which may contribute to making conservatories more aware of the importance of Music Therapy and the role that professionals of this field can play in these institutions. Guidance departments should be interdisciplinary teams, including music therapists, who would support all students by designing prevention and self-development programmes taking this proposal into account.

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