

MUSIC AS A TOOL FOR INTENTIONAL SELF-  
EMPOWERMENT

by

IVY MCCLURE

A THESIS

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## **Introduction**

Music exists in a large capacity in many people's lives, often playing in the background of daily tasks and serving as the soundtrack to many notable moments in an individual's life. Because it plays such a large role in many people's lives, a question arises: what is the value of engaging with and experiencing music? Jennifer Buchanan, accomplished Music Therapist and author of *Tune In: A Music Therapy Approach to Life* answers: "This truly illustrates the real value of music: it is determined by what it does to the person experiencing it" (Buchanan 9). This intensely personal quality is central to music's essence and critical in understanding why and how it has power to inspire our lives.

## **Background**

Music is very close to my heart and has been a meaningful part of every chapter of my life. As far back as I can remember, I sought out music because of the way it made me feel. When I was five, I remember begging my dad to turn on "marimba music" so we could dance around while making dinner. When I started second grade, I became desperately jealous of a friend of mine that had started piano lessons over the summer, so I sought out my own teacher, hoping she could show me how to make music with my own hands. In third grade, I joined the city children's choir and experienced people coming together to share their voices and working to make something beautiful for the first time; that feeling of musical joy in community made me giddy. Since then, I've learned several more instruments, including the clarinet, guitar and ukulele, played in 300 piece bands, sung in many more choirs, and I decided

to study music in college, because it is truly a central through-line of my life. In short, music is and always has been a large part of my life. Starting as far back as I can remember, music has continually helped build my confidence and sense of self, and it's given me an outlet to discover the ways I am best suited to better the world around me. In this way, music has been a source of empowerment for me for the duration of life.

### **Music as a Tool**

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a tool as “A device or implement...used to carry out a particular function.” Contained in that definition is the assumption that a tool is used with the conscious intention to accomplish a task. In the context of this thesis, music is considered to be a tool and the task it is equipped to accomplish is changing an individual's outlook, emotional state or somatic experience in a way that brings positive change to their life. As Buchanan says, “We already use music to either enhance or change our emotional state. From going to a concert to Christmas music at home, listening to music helps you connect to your emotions. The aim is to do so consciously” (Buchanan 43). In order to use music as a tool for anything, especially one for creating and promoting our own empowerment, we must first set out to use it both consciously and intentionally.

In their book, *Art as Therapy*, Alain De Botton and John Armstrong consider how visual art can be used as a therapeutic tool. In each of their arguments I see a direct parallel to the field of music, so when they say “Art can be a tool, and we need to focus more clearly on what kind of tool it is - and what good it can do for us,” I argue that we must also discover the good that can be done if we focus more clearly on what kind of tool music is (Botton 5). Botton and Armstrong define a tool as “an extension of the

body that allows a wish to be carried out, and that is required because of a drawback in our physical make-up,” so, to explore the purpose and utility of music as they do with visual art, “we must ask what kind of things we need to do with our minds and emotions, but have trouble with” (Botton 5). Certainly, at times we all have trouble feeling confident and motivated to do the things we wish to do. Music is already used as a tool for overcoming these challenges, but I believe it can be utilized more intentionally to widen music’s effectiveness and capabilities to empower individuals and our wider society.

In seeking to discover what kind of tool music is, we must examine what music can do for our well-being and the betterment of our lives. It goes without saying that music is a significant source of entertainment for the majority of people, but how can we look deeper to see music’s true capacity? With extensive experience as a Music Therapist in her hands, Buchanan cites that “More than just entertainment, music is a path to healing and compassion, to connecting to our feelings, our environment and the people around us—to feel connected to a bigger experience, a memory, and a person we love” (Buchanan 43). In her eyes, my eyes and the collective experience of many others, music has great capacity to uplift lives. So I ask these questions along with Buchanan, “What would happen if we made a small perspective shift and brought music more consciously into the foreground? What benefits could we anticipate in our mood, our level of stress, and our view on those around us?” (Buchanan 73). Answers to these questions are complex, largely subjective and somewhat ephemeral in nature, but they do inspire the forward thinking that led me to this topic initially.



This project will offer ideas to support the concept that, if used intentionally, music can be a tool for self-empowerment. Of course, the collection of ideas and stories in this thesis cannot sum up how the entire phenomenon of music is experienced by our whole society, rather they aim to provide a snapshot into how some people experience some empowerment through some music. They also aim to describe experiences I may have in common with readers in relation to music, in hopes of identifying elements of collective experience that give us agency to use music more intentionally in our lives. Instead of an all-encompassing view, this thesis will show how music has empowered me, offering specific paths and ideas, in order to show music's potential to empower and how this capacity can be expanded intentionally to reach even further.

## **Methods**

Methodology in the music field is very unique, in part because instead of doing, measuring and building off of research, as is the norm in other academic fields, the performing arts ask us to carry out, explore and discuss creative activity. A project in the performing arts begins with a problem and the artist, composer or musician works towards a solution; the substance of the work, however, is in discovering what the audience needs, what they're looking for at that particular moment and the creative activity that follows. Creative projects are intrinsically linked to the values of the artist, often the values that led them to their field initially. For some, capitalistic desires and the potential of making money lead them to the music field and for many others the value that sustains them and keeps them in the field of music is the desire to serve the public and add beauty to the world. The whole creative musical process consists of seeing what your audience needs, grounding the aims of the project in your values, the

creative work and the emotional response your project creates for the musicians and audience. My thesis is grounded in this methodology contextually and radically realizes the weight of creative intent and activity when it comes to music.

Since responses to music are personal, subjective and in my experience, captured most interestingly and meaningfully in stories, this project is framed through a phenomenological lens. The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes phenomenology as “an approach that concentrates on the study of consciousness and the object of direct experience.” This lens is significant because it allows me to look into my direct experience and practice self-inquiry. A phenomenological approach assures that my self-inquiry is valid and meaningful in this academic context. This thesis is creative and unique in its personal and emotionally charged quality, and that is purposeful; music is inherently creative, emotional and personal and this project radically accepts this and runs with it. The main substance of my thesis is the expression and categorization of my direct emotional and physical responses to music, because that is the truest way I’m able to discuss how music is a tool for self-empowerment. By putting forward my own experiences, I intend to show an example of how music is empowering so that readers might empathize and reflect on their own relationship to music.

People experience and respond to music in many ways and each individual’s response is nuanced and incredibly personal. However, these responses can be organized into four categories: the *interior subjective*, *interior objective*, *external subjective* and the *external objective* response. The *interior subjective* response refers to the intrinsic experience of listening to music, how music can provide a sense of self, confidence, a distraction and many more internal feelings. The *interior objective*

response is the somatic experience, how your body reacts when listening to music as well as how your body is coaxed to move in space. The *external subjective* experience of music occurs most often when listening or playing music with other people, when the music creates a collective sensation and often a feeling of cultural belonging or community. Along with the countless occurrences of the *external subjective* experience in culturally and religiously significant music, musical genres are also linked to this category of musical response because they are subjective groupings of artists and songs but still manage to create feelings of belonging, community and collective experience. The *external objective* experience is the sense that history is unfolding around you, such as when listening to music from your childhood and realizing how time has passed. These categories are helpful in considering how music can be a tool for empowerment because they capture most responses one could have when hearing a piece of music and help to organize this vast spectrum of responses.

Music is an incredibly personal experience of meaning for so many. Because of its ability to reach so far into so many people's lives, there is no way this thesis could encapsulate much more than my own perspective on how music is meaningful. In the following pages I offer up my own experience, woven with the ideas of experts and inspired minds, in an attempt to show some of the ways the music, if used intentionally, can be a powerful tool for self-empowerment.

## **The Empowerment Concept**

Empowerment is a concept laced with history and personal context for each individual, and its definition is largely intangible because it is so dependent on the object that we hope to empower or the subject that can empower themselves. Even with its elusive quality, I believe many of the positive effects of music I write about in this thesis can be collected under the umbrella of empowerment. The feeling of being empowered is so personalizable that it lends itself to music's unavoidable personal quality present in every way it affects our moods, somatic experiences and overall lives. So often, our emotional or physical responses to music are framed as only salient in the immediate moment, like our experience of music exists in a vacuum, separate from all of our other experiences—but that simply isn't the case. Any emotional or somatic response to music is directly linked to our identity and our host of past experiences. This large bushel of experience must be held holistically in the context of music, and especially in conversation with music as a tool for intentional self-empowerment. I have experienced the unique way that music can empower an individual, completely shifting my paradigm or even just improving my mood in a single moment, and I believe it's valuable to expand our knowledge about how music is a tool for empowerment so we can lift ourselves and each other up more intentionally.

This project discusses the capacity in music to be a tool for empowerment through the ideas of several music therapists, people who use music to help their clients everyday, and through the window of my own perspective and lived experience. This thesis aims to give a voice and language to these strong feelings of connection to music that many of us feel. This process is empowering in itself because it substitutes

graspable ideas in the place of the much more common, unidentifiable affinity for music in general. In this project, I ask those that commonly say “I love music!” to go a little deeper and consider how music exists in their lives specifically, and how it can be helpful as a personal tool if used intentionally. The process of developing ideas for this thesis has been truly empowering for me as I turn my swirling thoughts into more concrete concepts that I can actually watch evolve and use to build a meaningful project.

### **What is Empowerment Anyway?**

Before trying to outline some of the ways music can serve as a tool for empowerment, I must first outline a few pillars of the empowerment concept. For me, feeling empowered feels like being fully present in my body and trusting the enoughness of my whole self. My eyes are clear, like I can see and participate in life fully. Joy and motivation come freely, like a soft breeze washing over me on a spring day. When I feel empowered in the context of a project or activity, I feel like my whole heart is in it and I’m motivated and ready to start working. I’m sure some readers can relate to my description of what being empowered feels like, and some cannot; I offer my experience as a touchpoint in this dynamic concept that is challenging to pin down holistically, but many have different ways of experiencing empowerment. A friend once described her own experience to me, saying “when I feel empowered, I feel like I can advocate for my whole self and have the agency to take up space.” I offer up this anecdote to illustrate the nuance in every individual’s experience of empowerment; there’s an active and strong element that’s central to how my friend feels empowered, one that isn’t at the forefront of my personal definition. What is so uniquely interesting

about empowerment as a concept is that it is specific to each person who claims it as a helpful tool for their own growth. If I made a collage of the ways all the people in my life describe how they feel empowered, the result, although it would probably include some overlap and similarities between people, would surely be a large and colorful assortment of descriptions that frame empowerment more holistically and accurately than one concise definition ever could.

Empowerment means different things to different people and, in my experience, this is largely tied-up with where you're at in your life and process of getting to know yourself. The Music Therapist Randi Rolvsjord describes that "Empowerment is always happening and unfolding in culture, and differs from situation to situation. Thus there are several definitions emphasizing different aspects of empowerment." Although it can be different for everyone, I believe the empowerment concept is universal enough to discuss under several pillars that reveal its dynamic far-reaching nature instead of painting it as something that is too abstract to discuss. One way to describe the meaning of empowerment is the experience of one part of ourselves overpowering another part of ourselves; perhaps, our most central, true-natured part overpowering other less-central parts of ourselves like internal judges and the tendencies and beliefs that have been imposed on us by societal structures. In her book *Untamed*, author Glennon Doyle likens the latter of those less-central parts to what she calls 'our training'. Doyle writes about this process of being 'trained' from a young age:

When I was a child, I felt what I needed to feel and I followed my gut and I planned only from my imagination. I was wild until I was tamed by shame. Until I started hiding and numbing my feelings for fear of being too much...Until I surrendered myself to the cages of others'

expectations, cultural mandates, and institutional allegiances. Until I buried who I was in order to become what I should be. (46)

Perhaps the process of becoming empowered is the same as remembering this wildness that was originally inside of us. Surely an empowered moment can be inspired by outside forces, like new clothes for a job interview or a song that makes you feel ready for the day, but perhaps empowerment must come from up within ourselves, reigniting something that was always there instead of creating something new.

Another way to approach a wider meaning of empowerment is to examine the consequences of not feeling empowered, in other words, what is bred from disempowerment and feeling at-a-distance from a state of empowerment. To me, things that stand in this distance between my experience and the potential of feeling empowered are also things that stand in the way of caring for myself; this is because my experience of empowerment is directly linked to how able I feel to effectively care for myself. Naming what the experience of not feeling empowered is like is important because it gives us information about what the feelings we'd like to avoid. In a more collective context, we can also turn to patterns of oppression as examples of intense societal disempowerment. While this thesis is not about disempowerment, it is appropriate to name these examples in order to understand elements of what can stand in the way of feeling empowered.

### **A Music Therapy Approach**

The practice of Music Therapy has been proven to reduce anxiety and physical effects of stress, improve physical healing, help manage Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, reduce depression, reduce symptoms of psychological disorders like schizophrenia and

improve self-expression and communication (Levy). If the practice of empowerment is “promoting the self-actualization or influence” of the subject and an empowered individual has “the knowledge, confidence, means, or ability to do things or make decisions for oneself,” then empowerment is a central theme in the capacities of Music Therapy. While the practice of empowerment is intertwined in many aspects of Music Therapy, there are only a few articles that discuss their relationship. In their article *Therapy as Empowerment* that appears in *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*, Randi Rolvsjord discusses the political and clinical implications of empowerment theory in intersection with Music Therapy. Rolvsjord describes that empowerment is a concept “related to community psychology and the preventive model” and in the context of an individual, empowerment is viewed and labeled as psychological. They expand on their definition of empowerment by describing how “the ability to act and participate, as well as the feeling that one has the right to do so, is central to empowerment” and increases in “self-esteem, self-efficacy and locus of control might be seen as intrapersonal aspects of psychological empowerment” (Rolvsjord). I appreciate Rolvsjord’s specific yet holistic definition of empowerment from the field of Music Therapy, especially in context of their experience with numerous patients. What I appreciate most about Rolvsjord’s conclusions about empowerment is the idea that empowerment cannot be narrowed down to a specific cause and effect, but must be applied individually in the appropriate context. Rolvsjord argues that “the concept of empowerment must be said to be a sensitizing concept...not pointing to one specific object, but rather to an area of similar experiences” and later concludes that empowerment as a concept “questions the individuality of mental health (and health in



general) and the individual focus of therapeutic practises.” This conclusion gets to the central method of my thesis: we must take an individual, intuitive and holistic approach to discussing elements of musical empowerment because of the nature of music itself.

*Exercise for the Reader: How Does Empowerment Feel?*

There are many societal, historical and unique personal associations around the word ‘empowerment’. What do you observe in yourself when you hear or read the word ‘empowerment’? See if you can release those associations and instead focus on how being empowered feels to you.

1. Think of a time you felt empowered. Put yourself back in that memory—how did you feel? What were you thinking about? What did you feel you had the capacity to do?
2. Put some words or images to those feelings. Get specific about *how* you felt empowered in that moment.

Since the experience of empowerment is largely different for each individual that identifies it as a personally helpful concept, it’s important to recognize how your own empowerment feels. You may not be able to fully name it or outline it perfectly, because empowerment is such a moment-by-moment experience, but even expressing some of the ways it feels to you can be helpful going forward.

## Auditory Triggers

### Personal Music Triggers

One aspect of music that drew me to write about it originally is music's propensity to be intensely personal. This is one of the reasons it can be terrifying when someone casually asks "what kind of music do you like?" When I hear this question I feel like I am being given a choice to either bear my musical soul or protect myself (and my opinions on the music that is important to me) by naming a few well-known artists whose music I may or may not actually connect to. Music is deeply tied to emotions, memories and somatic experience, both painful, joyful and everything in between, so of course it feels scary to be fully truthful and really tell someone what music you like. Music's deeply personal quality is intertwined with how we feel when listening to or playing music and how we experience it as a wider phenomenon.

The concepts of auditory and music triggers are helpful in understanding why and how music is so personally charged. The Music Therapist and author of *Tune In*, Jennifer Buchanan, defines auditory triggers as "sounds, songs or styles of music that quickly evoke an emotional state" (Buchanan 48). To me, the word "trigger" brings up all sorts of associations, including strong annoyance at its misuse when people jokingly say they are "triggered," because I know how real it is when I am *actually* triggered by something I see, smell or hear. Still, I believe the utility of the concept of musical triggers overpowers this bad association and can offer up a few tangible tools for using music intentionally in the context of one's memory and past experiences. Buchanan expands on her definition, explaining that, although most of us think of negative

triggers first, “if music is so powerful that it can trigger us negatively, then it can trigger us ‘happy’ too” (Buchanan 48). I find this incredibly true—think about a lullaby your parents sang to you as a child or a song you used to blast in the car with your high school friends—songs like these surely bring back more positive feelings than negative ones.

In addition to negative and ‘happy’ music triggers, Buchanan also outlines two types of auditory triggers differentiated by how they are created. As Buchanan explains, an *inspired music trigger* is created when you hear a piece of music and “strong feelings arise from it independent of anything that may be happening”; this kind of trigger can be helpful (or not so helpful) at a later time when you hear the piece of music again and “recreate the feelings you first had when you first heard that piece of music” (Buchanan 49). An *associated music trigger* is created when something happens that causes a strong emotional reaction and music is playing simultaneously, directly before or after the emotional event; later, when you hear the same music again, that association is triggered along with the same feelings from the original event. These kinds of triggers are helpful in considering the hundreds (probably thousands) of auditory triggers that exist in my own life and they shed some light on how and why music is personally charged for so many of us.

Drawing out and naming the notable musical triggers in my life helps me think specifically about how music affects me, including how music affects my mood, outlook on life, feelings towards my memories and processing of past experiences. Thinking specifically about my relationship to music is the goal: if I hope to use music with intention, I must first study and grasp some understanding about how it has

affected me in the past and how it continues to affect me in the present. Buchanan explains a straightforward strategy for using music intentionally in the context of your own triggers: “recognize which sounds are triggering negative and positive emotions, and then find ways to reduce the incidence of the negative sounds, and to increase the incidence of positive sounds” (Buchanan 56). This sounds simple, but how often do we actually practice noticing the specific emotions a song brings up for us while we listen to it? Furthermore, how often do we make note of those emotions so we can bring them up again later with the same song?

*Exercise for the Reader: Practice Recalling*

Even without knowing specifically about all of the positive or negative musical triggers that exist in your life, returning to a particularly positive musical memory is often very simple and can be a powerful tool. Try working through the steps below to practice this:

1. First, recall a time when you felt truly happy. This can mean whatever you want it to, as long as the memory elicits good feelings for you.
2. Was there music around you at this time? What were you listening to, or if you sing or play your own music, what music were you playing around this time? Try to remember any specific artists, songs or pieces of music associated with the happy memory.
3. After you identify it, go back and listen to that same music, or sit down and play that same song.
4. Notice how you were feeling before, during and after returning to that music. Did it change your frame of mind in any way?

Ideally, that exercise can spark some understanding about how simple it is to use your positive musical memories to improve your mood in a given moment. The same

sequence also often occurs by happenstance; maybe you're on driving home from work, decide to switch on the radio and are met with a familiar song that you listened to frequently during a favorite vacation. If you have a strong association with the song, those original feelings, like feeling carefree and relaxed on vacation, will be triggered and you'll feel them again in the current moment.

### **Associated and Inspired Music Triggers**

Understanding how musical triggers are formed is another way to think specifically about how music affects you, especially when trying to build skills to use music intentionally in the future. In this section, I begin to offer anecdotes as fodder for discussion and examples of the ways music triggers form. Although anecdotes are sometimes seen as a form of expression that is too subjective, perhaps even flimsy, in this context I believe they are uniquely situated to offer perspective and explicate shared experiences of music. I offer them up as demonstrations of the ways music can make a single individual feel in a specific moment, as a basis to build understanding on how we can claim agency over that process in future moments, even though our experience may be entirely different.

I'll focus first on associated music triggers, as those are often the simplest to trace back and outline specifically. An associated music trigger forms when music is playing in the vicinity, around the same time or in the physical vicinity, of an event that elicits a strong emotional reaction. For me, these triggers are frequently formed with songs that I wouldn't seek out on my own but that I appreciate because of their relationship with a meaningful memory. They can also exist with multiple, sometimes

seemingly contradictory emotions attached to them. For instance, the classic graduation march, *Pomp and Circumstance* by Sir Edward Elgar, is a prime example of this in my life. I was a dedicated member of my high school's Wind Ensemble and each year, we would be asked to play during the graduation ceremony while graduates were walking in. The event took place in mid-June in a large unairconditioned colosseum and the walking-in process usually took about an hour from start to finish, making our assigned role of providing the notorious graduation background music a sticky, pain-stakingly boring marathon of mediocre performance. When I graduated high school I was freed from this unfortunate responsibility and instead experienced walking into a large colosseum with my peers to see my family cheering. Whenever I hear the familiar *Pomp and Circumstance* melody, I recall both, how it felt to be out of breath from playing the same two pages of traditional music for almost an hour in sweaty plastic chairs, and the accomplished, relieved feeling that comes from graduating high school. My emotionally charged relationship with the graduation song demonstrates how associated music triggers, while not always pleasant or formed around what we might deem to be 'good music', are powerful bonds between important moments in life and music.

Another interesting and powerful element of associated music triggers is their relation to a specific physical place in a person's past. Sometimes I turn on the radio or happen upon a song in someone else's playlist and get transported back to a particular place from my memory. A friend and I used to listen to *Habit* by Still Woozy on every public transportation while traveling in Europe on our study abroad program, so whenever I hear that song now, I can close my eyes and be right back there with her on

a rickety bus in Nice, France. Music has this unique ability to almost literally transport us back to these special places. Another friend once told me about a few of her specific place-memories linked to songs and artists from traveling with her family and claimed that their association with music actually “cemented access to memories that I don’t know would otherwise be accessible in the same way for me.” For her, music has the power to hold those memories in a special and safe place because of its ability to transport her right back to a specific place.

While there are clear differentiations between associated and inspired music triggers, this line gets blurry when considering how, even when we are independently inspired by a song, we still link it to the time we first heard or formed a connection to it. For instance, I first heard the song *Blower’s Daughter* by Damien Rice in the fall of my sophomore year of college. I was initially inspired and struck by the song’s emotional, wistful quality, so I saved it and kept listening to it when I wanted to feel thoughtful and a bit sad. During that time, I was in my first serious romantic relationship and a lot of strong emotions were flying around, so of course, I also linked that song to that time in my life. I held that hybrid associated-inspired music trigger for a year before I found myself in Dublin, Ireland on the first leg of my study abroad. A group of us were walking one night when we came across the Molly Malone statue, a common venue for live music and busking musicians at all times of the day and night, and found a man with a sweet, clear voice like Irish breakfast tea, singing *Blower’s Daughter*. In that moment I was flooded with all the emotions I first felt toward the song, all the associations it had formed with my past relationship and with newly forming feelings of warmth, gratitude and excitement for this experience of beginning my study abroad

journey in such a magical city filled with music. The song that had first formed an inspired music trigger because of the strong emotional response I had to it initially had also formed several associated music triggers with important moments in my life. Now when I hear *Blower's Daughter*, I remember these moments most clearly while also appreciating the aesthetic of the song and how it inspires strong emotions independent from my memory.

It's necessary to push our understanding of how music affects us past the two sided definition of associated and inspired music triggers because emotions are too personal and subjective to be able to corral our strong emotional responses to music into two distinct boxes. The process of stacking moments and memories associated with a one specific song certainly blurs the line between associated and inspired music triggers. Once, on a drive with a dear friend, the song *I Lived* by OneRepublic came on and she was launched into a host of strong feelings that are tied to that specific song for her. She told me about how the song always changes that way she thinks about her current moment in life and also about all of the memories that are linked to the song. She described how, for her, "the song isn't just solely attached to one moment, it's like a feeling that I can attach to many moments." This idea of a collection of moments united under the same song, all tied together by the same unnamable feeling, demonstrates her agency over the nature of her own music triggers. Instead of categorizing the song into an associated or inspired kind of trigger, she can continuously make new memories with the song that she already loves so much. If feelings associated with a single song are complex and dynamic enough to be strongly tied to multiple moments, we must also push past the binary of positive and negative musical triggers.



This means opening our eyes to the exceptional spectrum of emotions that music from our past can bring back to us.

### **How Are Music Triggers Helpful?**

Strong music triggers attached to strong feelings, particularly feelings of joy and solidness in identity, are powerful tools because when you hear that same music, you can expect to feel some essence of those same feelings again. Jennifer Buchanan testifies that her work in Music Therapy has shown her “that by using music according to certain guidelines and with intent, it is possible to bring positive change to your daily life” (Buchanan 65). She elaborates, saying “Once you become aware of your triggers, you have the chance to use them proactively to your benefit...Paying attention to what you like and don’t like can be the start of not only understanding your triggers but living a life accompanied by the music and sounds that help you instead of harm you” (Buchanan 69). Emotions, often largely out of our control and therefore the source of much frustration, are brought into a unique place of agency with music triggers; we suddenly have some ability to control how we feel while using music as a tool in conjunction with knowledge and awareness of how we have been affected in the past. If we can identify the specific music that makes us feel good, we can listen to it purposefully in moments when we’re feeling down.

Just as emotions are too complex to be categorized as simply good or bad, an understanding of music triggers also needs a more intricate description. Our memories hold a widely varied array of personal experiences and emotional responses and the music woven into them is no different. In seeking to understand our own auditory and music triggers, we must also give ourselves grace in the complexity of our own

experience. Buchanan affirms that “Music can change your mood regardless of whether you are a trained musician, a passive listener sitting at an intersection, a performer, an audience member” or any party in an encounter with music (Buchanan 62). So music is already constantly affecting us as we move through the world, whether we like it or not, but harnessing music’s personal and meaningful utility to each of us as individuals entails a process with more care, intention and additional awareness.

## Intentionality

In attempting to uplift oneself using music as a tool, it is necessary to center intention behind a desire to empower yourself. Before deciding what music is best for us in the current moment, it is helpful to ask the question: what qualities in myself do I intend to empower? Once we have an idea of what we hope to change, we can “stop just letting music happen to us and...begin to choose our music for a specific purpose” (Buchanan 30). The stated purpose of Buchanan’s book, *Tune In*, is to “help you use music intentionally and with purpose to feel better...to show you how to use music to uplift your spirits and feel healthier” (Buchanan 5). With this as her goal, she explains the necessity of intention:

To do something with intention means that you do it purposefully with a goal in mind. Using music intentionally means that you aren’t just passively listening to music because you like it or because it makes you feel better. Rather, you are choosing to use music in a way to improve your well-being. You have made yourself aware of the various effects music has on you and then consciously use music to help you in whatever way you need help in that moment. (Buchanan 22)

Even a rough outline of what you hope to feel through listening to music is a good intention to start with—maybe it’s a slow day and you’re hoping to feel more motivated, or you find yourself numbing your feelings around something challenging and you’d like to feel free to let them out—whatever it is, heading into a music choice with intention is a way to let music really help you.

To me, intention is grounding. If I solidly sit for a minute and decide to do, say or feel something with intention, I am occupying the present moment. I can simply exist in the presence of the action and the intention behind it, without questioning it or wandering off. Practicing intentionality in my daily life also looks a lot like trusting my

intuition, or as Glennon Doyle names it, ‘my knowing’. When setting out to do something, my ingrained instinct is to listen outwardly—to the voices of my friends and family, my to do lists, my ever-demanding Google Calendar—but in practicing intentionality, I practice listening inwardly. I turn my focus to the little voice inside me that exists beyond the chatter of the louder voices. These loud voices are the ones that make it difficult to breathe with their chatter, saying “you should be farther along,” “remember to text them back so they know you value their friendship!” or “you’re definitely missing out on something right now,” so I have to listen hard to what the little voice is nudging me towards in order to hear it.

Listening inwardly to what will actually be beneficial for us in a current moment is important, because unfortunately music can also be used to ‘empower’ qualities in ourselves that may not be beneficial in the current moment or in the long run. For instance, if I wake up in a depressed state one morning, feeling heavy and reluctant to start my day, choosing to turn on music could take me down several different roads, depending on the intention behind my choice of music. Surely, there is some music that could give me a boost out of bed and help me remember some positive elements of my life, but there is also other music that would embolden my depressed state and make me feel even heavier. Finding the right intention behind how we use music as a tool for self-empowerment is key. For me, finding this right intention behind my use of music is as simple as finding the urge to care for myself. When I am committed to caring for myself, to helping myself feel more alive and eager to do things that I love, I make more positively empowering musical choices.

Although it's a good starting point, even a seemingly perfect intention can never guarantee the perfect outcome. It's important to keep in mind that mistakes still happen, even when using music with a grounded intention to improve your current moment. Buchanan says that "As we find our music triggers and begin to use them consciously, there is a time of trial and error," and even as a trained and experienced Music Therapist, she does not always get it right on the first try (Buchanan 59). When we do make a mistake with the music we turn on and begin to realize that the effect it's having on us is not one we want, "it is important to just stop the music and make an immediate shift in tactic" (Buchanan 59). This shift in tactic can mean switching on a song you know feels good to you consistently, taking a moment in silence without music, or anything else that feels needed in the moment for you. Returning to your intention will also help to correct the mistake by recentering how you set out to care for yourself in the first place.

*Exercise for the Reader: Try Listening Inwardly*

The process of centering intention behind music choices is most often a moment-by-moment process. If you'd like to practice this, it may be best to return to this concept in a moment when you'd like to change the way you're feeling. If you find yourself in one of those moments, try working through the steps below:

1. Stop for a second and recognize how you're feeling. How does it feel in your body?
2. How would you like the way you're feeling to change? Identify a wish, hope or ideal result you'd like to see and feel. Set an intention to

care for yourself simply by trying to make your wish a reality through turning on some music.

3. Hold that intention as you choose what music to listen to; consider which of your music triggers might be helpful in shifting how you feel with your intention in mind. For example, if your wish is to feel more hopeful and energized, maybe turn towards an associated music trigger from a time when you were feeling that way—like while on a sunny summer drive or after you had just accomplished something.
4. After considering which triggers might be helpful, choose a song or a handful of songs to listen to, even if they aren't perfect choices in your mind. It's important to try your best when choosing music with intention, but also to not get caught up in getting it perfect. You're probably never going to get it exactly perfect.
5. Listen to the song(s) and observe how they make you feel. Does anything change in the way your body feels?

## **Widening Awareness**

*“Awareness is the capacity to bring into consciousness that which we know.”*

*Moshe Feldenkrais*

Among its many remarkable qualities, music has great capacity to widen our awareness. This capacity can be felt in countless ways and each is unique to the relationship the listener has to themselves and the music they choose to experience. The phenomenon of music widening our awareness can happen both purposely and by happenstance, though we are all probably more familiar with the latter experience. Maybe during a busy day you find yourself rushing from thing to thing and, while it’s imperative you stay focused and zoomed in on the task at hand, you lack motivation and feel disconnected from yourself. On busy days like this, I try to make time to listen to music that helps me zoom out, even for a moment—maybe I can find this time while walking between commitments and consciously listen to a song that helps me become more mindful in the present moment. I’m sure many of us have felt a transformation of awareness from music like this in one way or another—maybe you turn on a song that is close to your heart and it gives you a second to breathe and realize that the thing you’re obsessing over, the thing that’s torturing you, isn’t really that large in the grand scheme of things.

### **Zoom Out, Zoom In**

Music allows me to zoom out and recognize my life as more than just the things I am struggling with in the current moment. Instead, I can widen my gaze and see my life as a brimming flow of moments, connections and feelings. One type of awareness widening with music is letting it remind us of our own growth. For me, the song

*Slipping Through My Fingers* by ABBA not only triggers memories with my mom when I was a little girl, but it also brings awareness to my growth over time. When I listen to it, I feel like I can watch myself grow up and watch my relationship with my mom evolve over time. I feel more whole after listening to *Slipping Through My Fingers* because I can acknowledge my entire self, including who I've been all throughout my life. In this way, music widens my awareness to acknowledge and smile at the remarkable life I'm living.

This process of zooming out with music's help is also present when noticing new kinds of personal growth. Have you ever heard a new song that makes you realize a way you have grown? Jennifer Buchanan speaks to this experience, saying, "New music can also help celebrate new beginnings by revealing something about ourselves not there previously" (Buchanan 34). To me, this feels like discovering a way I've grown while I wasn't paying attention. I hear a new song and realize—whether it was through intentional personal work, self-care practices, working through relational challenges or any combination of experiences—I have grown in a way I hadn't realized yet. An example of this type of widening awareness that I experienced recently came from listening to the song *Ghosting* by Lucius. I was on a walk, listening to a new playlist from Spotify when I happened upon the song. Listening to *Ghosting* feels breezy, reflective and positive and when I first experienced those feelings from it, I was struck with how happy I was with my life at that moment. I noticed how my overall contentment with my daily life has risen greatly, something I've worked on through mindfulness practice and caring for my body with food and movement. Music's ability



to bring these realizations of growth to the surface is an exceptional expression of its capacity to widen awareness.

While the experience of ‘zooming out’ to realize a more expansive view of things is accessible through music, the experience of ‘zooming in’ is also practicable with music. To me, a process of zooming in is also a process of widening awareness because I am zooming back into my own body and expanding awareness about how my body is feeling. While listening to a single song, I can transform from feeling obsessive, anxious and totally trapped in my whirring mind, to feeling calmer, mindful of my surroundings and much more in my body. In *Untamed*, Glennon Doyle asks this important question: “Why do I leave my body to live in this dangerous mind of mine?” (Doyle 323). This gets to the root of it for me: occupying and living inside my body is how I feel most alive, most myself and most connected to the current moment. Simply put, I want my awareness to live permanently inside my body. And music can draw it back to where that awareness belongs. To me, the experience of being brought to tears by music is empowering because it brings my awareness back into my body. Overcome with a physical response, I am zoomed back in.

**zoom out / content in rosy plum**

*my entire self feels content tonight.  
like i am free to walk  
to see to watch to laugh to eat  
free to notice and take mindful steps*

*and the sky is dyed  
rosy plum, dusty blue  
i'm not sure i've seen the sky  
show her colors just like this before*

*perhaps this can be my resting place  
this content rosy plum sky  
softness in my breath, in each step  
feeling quiet in my chest.*

*and i still feel in all dimensions  
up down anxious restless elated bouncy  
content clearly does not mean broken  
or gone, like my sometimes frozen gaze*

*i am really here.  
this is my beautiful life to wonder at  
this is my love to learn how to serve  
this is exactly where i'm meant to be.*

*tonight, trying my best feels perfect  
i have always been free, only with  
cloudy eyes and knotted breath  
now, this ability to breathe is all mine*

*it is here for safekeeping,  
set free with blinking sunlit eyes  
not going anywhere because  
mindfulness is my heart's true nature.*

01.15.21

**zoom in / light lilac existence**

*take a breath  
there you go, let your stomach expand  
chest rise  
let life fill you with it's spirit.  
close your eyes  
let that stinging ache  
drip down your eyelids  
melt into your cheeks  
and settle.*

*zoom in.  
feel your heart in your body  
beat. you are living.  
and here,  
washing in this light lilac existence.*

*sway with the leaves,  
follow your chest's rise and fall.  
be bright  
passionate, honest and earnest.*

*zoom out.  
the universe loves you.  
you are made of only love.  
let it course through the world  
through you.*

12.07.19

## **Relief**

There are some moments in my life where, because of conflict in my relationships, insecurity or internalized shame, I feel what I often refer to as ‘tied-up inside’. Sometimes, my stomach is in knots and my breath is shallow and forced, and other times I just feel a loud nagging tug in my gut that takes my awareness out of the current moment. When I feel tied-up inside, music is my relief. I turn on *Mary* by Big Thief, *Five Foot Three* by Flannel Graph or *Cherry Wine* by Hozier—all songs from a playlist called ‘zoom in/light lilac existence’ that reminds me to breathe and just exist in the current moment—and I close my eyes and let the weariness melt into my cheeks. That collection of songs, and the others unnamed, are precious to me. They will always be precious to me because of their unique ability to calm and loosen the ties inside me.

What is it about these songs that helps my knots loosen? In her book *Tune In*, Music Therapist Jennifer Buchanan writes that listening to music builds feelings of connection to our emotions, environment and the people around us (Buchanan 27). As much as music can *bring* to my awareness in a single moment, it can also help my racing thoughts melt away. To this, Buchanan writes that music “doesn’t get rid of the cause of the stress, but it can create space around our spirit, for a few hours or even for a few minutes, and give us relief from our stresses” (Buchanan 27). To me, the space that music creates feels a whole lot like peace, even on the stormiest days. Even one breath in that space loosens the knots and makes me feel less tied up inside.

## **Connections**

Describing how empowerment is interlaced with these experiences and examples of how music can widen awareness is extremely challenging. This is because

I feel that their connection is both inherently obvious and entirely indescribable due to the ineffable nature of the spectrum of experiences I've situated under the umbrella of 'widening awareness'. As I've said before, to me, feeling empowered feels like being fully present in my body and trusting the enoughness of my whole self. These two attributes align with the processes of zooming in and zooming out; zooming in brings my awareness into my body and zooming out helps me realize truths about my whole self. Let this collection of experiences, ones named as examples of awareness widening, add to the colorful collage of empowerment's definition and advocate for music's resolute power to foster self-empowerment.

## Feeling Seen

What brings a song close to your heart? What holds it there over time? Though each person's answers to these questions are likely quite different, when I think about songs that feel close to my heart, a common thread arises: they make me *feel seen*. To me, feeling seen by a piece of music feels like the artist, or sometimes the song itself, is recognizing my true experience. I feel intimately connected to these songs similarly to how I feel connected to friends that I've shared my experiences of personal struggles with—I am bonded to them through vulnerability and understanding. According to the social researcher Dr. Brené Brown, "Connection is why we're here. We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives, and without it there is suffering" (Brown 8). This hardwiring is evident in many areas of the human experience beyond just human-to-human connection; we can feel deeply connected to places, movements, identities and countless other elements of our lives. Through the experience of feeling seen, music can also foster this kind of connection in the relationship between the listener and the music itself.

It is a great relief to experience music that makes a mysterious and painful internal struggle more known. Mental Health America cites that, for many people experiencing mental illness, "a diagnosis can be a relief in that they are finally able to put a name to a problem." This can be likened to the experience of feeling seen by music; listening to a song that puts words, sounds and overall expression to a particular flavor of experience, especially one that feels inexplicable to you, brings a similar kind of relief. Much of the time, I walk around with many complicated emotions stewing inside of me, and when I hear a song that feels like it understands, I feel cracked open

and no longer alone. The recently released song *Before the Line* by dodie cracked me open in this exact way. One of my most favorite musicians, dodie writes deeply personal lyrics and sings them with a voice like rose petals in her music that is uniquely emotional, soft, vulnerable and real. Among the many relatable themes in her music—love, loss, insecurity, trauma—are the topics of dissociation, depersonalization and derealization, mental health conditions that she and I both struggle with in some capacity. Dissociation is a fairly common experience of feeling unreal when your brain decides to ‘check out’; the mental health nonprofit Mind describes that “dissociation is one way the mind copes with too much stress,” and describes that “If you dissociate, you may feel disconnected from yourself and the world around you” (Mind). A chronic experience of dissociation is described as depersonalization, which is marked by experiences of “unreality, detachment, or being an outside observer with respect to one’s thoughts, feelings, sensations, body, or actions,” derealization, which is characterized by feelings of “unreality or detachment with respect to surroundings,” or a combination of the two conditions (DSM-5 302). Independent from these definitions, feelings of dissociation are extremely hard to explain; I can attempt an explanation, saying things like “I just feel really spaced out a good amount of the time, and I can’t control it,” or “everything looks unreal and far away,” but it is still hard to communicate the exact feeling. When I first heard *Before the Line*, I was struck with a realization: here was another human trying to explain the same feeling I struggle to explain. Here are a few of dodie’s lyrics that approach the feeling of dissociation:

*I used to smile at every star and thank the sky  
Now I look up to all the duds and wonder why*

*I feel like  
All of them are gone  
Oh, tell me, did someone snatch the light?  
Why doesn't it look right?  
Now every morning since the line between my lives  
I greet the sun, and ask, 'have I already died?  
If not then why am I alone?  
And when can I come home?' (dodie)*

When I first heard those lyrics, I felt as though they understood the experiences of dissociation I struggle to explain. I felt like they *saw* me and recognized my experience clearly. This song is about something so personal to me, and it turns a painful ongoing struggle into a beautiful expression that this is only one aspect of the human experience. It is so comforting to love a piece of art created out of suffering that I can empathize with, and that feels like it is also empathizing with me. Knowing someone else is intimate with this way of being, even though it's painful and frustrating, integrates the thing I struggle with into my understanding of a wider human experience—I am not alone.

Jennifer Buchanan discusses the feeling of being seen by music through her curiosity around some people's propensity and choice to listen to sad music. Citing interviews with "many individuals about why they listen to music that the majority of society perceives as sad," she explains that "the answers are usually based on validation" (Buchanan 56). For the people Buchanan interviewed, in "using music that feels sad to them, other feelings such as isolation are not felt; in other words, they don't feel alone" (Buchanan 56). If she had interviewed me, I would have cited a similar experience: put simply, when I'm feeling sad, listening to sad music makes me feel seen

and validates my sadness. This is why the song *driver's license* by Olivia Rodrigo became so popular this year; in her lyrics, Rodrigo expressed the specific kind of sadness that comes after a breakup and many people felt validated through her expression of this shared experience. Sometimes listening to sad music helps draw out the feelings of sadness I need to bring to the forefront of my consciousness in order to process and eventually move on from them. Buchanan sums up this experience, describing how the sad music can strike “a vibrational harmony with the person’s emotional tone, and that can lift them up, even just a little” (Buchanan 56). Overall, music written about emotional topics and specific experience is most likely to make someone feel seen. Sad music is a prime example of music’s capacity to validate experience and make the listener feel seen.

### **Vulnerability**

*“...we must dare to show up and let ourselves be seen. This is vulnerability.”*  
*Brené Brown, Daring Greatly*

When I feel seen by a piece of music, I feel recognized in a vulnerable state and I become bonded to it through that recognition and expression of vulnerability. In her book *Daring Greatly*, Brené Brown explains that “Vulnerability is not weakness, and the uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure we face every day are not optional” (Brown 2). She goes on to describe how “Our only choice is a question of engagement. Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose” (Brown 2). These are bold claims, and Brown’s research-based understanding of vulnerability raises a question when applied in the context of music: if it is necessary to open oneself up to another human in order to build



a connection, must we first open ourselves up to being affected by music in order for it to have a strong emotional effect? In other words, is some level of vulnerability required in order for music to be effective in changing our emotional state? While connection and strong emotional responses are not the same, they do have a relationship under the concept of feeling seen. For me, it is certainly true that I am more open to being affected by music in some moments more than others, but it is also true that music has a certain power to make me more vulnerable already inside of it. Perhaps, music's remarkable quality to make us feel seen is also a capacity to make us experience vulnerability with our own selves.

## Music as a Companion

Music can accompany and follow the trajectory of an individual's life much like a trusted friend. We often meet music when we're young and build our relationship with it while we grow up, claiming more and more agency over the music we engage with just as we claim more agency over the rest of our lives. Eloise Ristad, author of *A Soprano on Her Head*, describes how this relationship begins even before we're born:

Research has shown that the fetus responds to voices, sounds, music. The newborn baby carries this response into a new world. The movements of the baby are not just random movements, but are often choreographed by surrounding sounds. By the time the baby is a toddler, no research is needed to convince us that the child is responding to music. (Ristad 27)

We respond to music throughout our lives and at every major point of development, music is there to offer some comfort, validation or means of expression. Our teenage years are particularly salient in defining our individual relationship with music; Jennifer Buchanan cites that "Teens have a very personal and self-centered relationship with music," in this time they often "personalize the songs [they listen to] and validate their angst with the lyrics and melodies they internalize" (Buchanan 81). If music has already followed us through our entire lives, lending a hand in the development of our own independence and emotional expression, music can only become a closer companion when used intentionally to better our experiences.

Music has been one my most beloved companions since I can remember. As the nature of companionship with music is based on an extended relationship to specific collections of songs over time, I must take a narrative approach in expressing this idea. Below are a few stories about my life with music as my close companion. Let them demonstrate how music is an aspect of my whole self, showing up for me again and

again and continually bringing me feelings of empowerment, even if they were unseen in the moment.

### **The Quarter Rest Lesson: Anxiety and How Music Helps**

The anxious feeling always starts with a tightening in my throat or stomach and a quickening of my heartbeat. Then my brain begins to overload, my breath is shortened and loses its easy depth. I almost forget how to breathe in those first few moments. I want to curl up on the floor and hold myself, even start to cry, do anything to release the tension—but I feel as if I can't move on my own anymore. I have to remind my limbs they are not paralyzed and force my muscles to do their normal jobs. My brain races from one task to the next, replays videos of interactions and tells me I should be simultaneously managing, fixing and accomplishing in this moment, even though I feel unable to breathe.

Often, music is the only thing that can break this immobilizing anxious spell. The swell of a beloved song reminds my chest how to rise and fall and the lyrics give my racing brain something to focus on. Music gives me an entry point into caring for myself. By an entry point, I truly mean one task that I know I can do to help myself feel better. Anxiety hides many of my carefully grown and cultivated tools away or flings them out of my reach, but I know I can always just sit and listen to music.

I first identified this tightening, immobilizing, racing feeling as anxiety in my senior year of high school. Looking back on that time, I clearly bit off way more than I could chew; I was the head captain of a large co-ed ultimate frisbee program, a member of my high school's wind ensemble and concert choir, both of which traveled frequently to compete, in three Advanced Placement classes, preparing for the AP tests, and I

worked about 12 hours a week at Trader Joe's. Most of these commitments were things that truly lit up my heart and made me feel like myself, but I still felt anxious a lot of the time. I remember sitting in a wind ensemble rehearsal one day, looking at my sheet music and realizing that quarter rests (seen below for non-music-readers) are a real chance to rest for a moment before continuing on. In common time, there are four beats in one measure of music and quarter rests are literally an instruction to be silent for one beat before continuing the musical line. At that point in my life, I really struggled with the concept of resting. I would either work myself to the bone, keeping the momentum moving fast between tasks, or I would try to take a short break and never return to the task at hand. That quarter rest metaphor expanded into a coping mechanism for that entire year; I could take a quarter rest, one solid beat to breathe, and then continue on. In short, a quarter rest was the role model I needed.

Now, I have a small quarter rest tattooed on my left wrist. I got this tattoo during the summer between high school and college as a gift to myself. I'm left-handed and wanted to remember to take a breath while writing in college, but I also wanted a reminder of my own struggle during senior year. These days, I'm a bit better at the quarter rest practice and I'm thankful for the reminder to breathe for a beat before continuing on, and to return to music in those moments when anxiety is immobilizing.

### **Left of Your Joy: Transitioning Abroad**

The summer after my sophomore year of college, I had the incredible, lifetime-awaited opportunity to study abroad. As a first-generation college student relying solely on financial aid to pay for college, studying abroad was a really big deal for me. I had always imagined what it would be like to walk amongst classmates in Europe,

absorbing the feeling of being in a magical new place with a community of peers, but I never *really* thought it was in the cards for me. I spent the first few weeks of summer before my program listening to songs about Europe, namely *Our Last Summer* by ABBA, and daydreaming about what it was going to feel like to actually be there. Just before flying to Dublin, where my program would begin, I worked as a “music walla” at a camp for high schoolers, teaching curious folks how to play ukulele and providing musical energy and ambiance throughout the week. One of my fellow music wallas, Amanda, proclaimed that we needed some more “sweet sweet harms” on one of our songs and the name for my summer playlist was born.

As my friend Emma and I were driving south from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina where the camp takes place, to Atlanta, Georgia where Emma is from and where my flight to Dublin would depart from, she introduced me to a song: *Left of Your Joy* by The Collection. Emma has great taste in music and I liked the song, so I added it to the ‘sweet sweet harms’ playlist without thinking much. When I got to Dublin, sleep-deprived, excited and so afraid to pass through customs by myself, this song was what I decided to switch on. *Left of Your Joy* became my anthem of transition for my entire time in Europe. My program, lovingly named *The Genius of Study Abroad: Revolutionary Imagination*, spent time in Dublin, Oxford, London and Paris over the course of three and a half weeks, so there was no shortage of transition on this trip. Whenever I found myself on a bus, in a cab, on a train under the English Channel, on a 3 hour ferry ride, on a plane, on the London Tube or even if I was just feeling a sense of movement, I would switch on *Left of Your Joy*. In this time of constant motion, I was taking in more new sights, information and feeling more feelings than ever before.

Hearing this song helped everything I had just experienced in the previous city settle in, or at least be pushed aside for later processing, and I was usually able to release enough to prepare to start another section of my adventure. While thoughtfully listening, I was able to reflect for a moment on how miraculous the moment was, and how utterly alive I felt in it.

Now, when I switch on *Left of Your Joy* I actually feel like I'm moving again. I remember what it felt like on those trains, busses and ferries moving between magical cities and I let my body feel that again. Now, I use that feeling to turn pages in my life; I move from visiting a 'city' that holds a collection of moments, a particular time in my journey of life, to the next. *Left of Your Joy* is an incredibly strong associated music trigger for me and I use it intentionally to remember and reflect on my time in Europe, but also to move and transition purposefully through my life.

### **Found of Your Joy: Maximizing and Music**

The CliftonStrengths Assessment, a research-based assessment created by Don Clifton to study and discover what is "right with people versus what is wrong with people," identified my top five leadership strengths as empathy, includer, positivity, connectedness and maximizer, in that order (Gallup). The first four I knew already, I'm familiar with those parts of myself and like to think that I am conscious of those qualities as my areas of strength, but I was not as prepared to hear 'maximizer' at the end of that list. An expert once explained to me that the maximizer strength is present in people that, finding themselves in great situations, feel an urge to make them even better and act on that urge through their other strengths and interests. Upon more

reflection, I've come to realize that music is one of the primary ways I flex my maximizer strength.

One example of how I used music to maximize an experience was the day my study abroad program travelled from London to Paris, our last and my most awaited destination. I woke up early, sat on my suitcase to make it close around my sloppily folded clothes and met the rest of the group to walk to the train station. I was buzzing. It felt like one of those days where you just know something glorious is going to happen; even though I had no clue what I was about to experience, I could feel that it was going to be magical. When we arrived at the train station, our group found ourselves with quite a bit of time until our train departed—as it turns out, a good amount of time on a travelling study abroad program is spent waiting as a group and occupying ourselves in those moments of transition. I turned towards music in these moments, usually putting in my headphones and switching on whatever felt needed in the moment. This time though, I noticed a large grand piano sitting near us in the station—bench empty and just begging to be played. When I sat down and started playing—*Nuvole Bianche* by Ludovico Einaudi—I felt my chest release. The buzzing I had felt all morning melted away and was replaced with a soaring sense of pure joy. It was like I could zoom out for a second, sitting at the piano, and realize how truly exceptional the moment was. Later on the train, our professor asked us to journal on the following questions: Where and how do you find joy? What nourishes your spirit when you are brimming and when you are exhausted and stressed? Here's what I wrote, brimming indeed: "I got to play the piano in the train station this morning, and it filled up my soul, my heart smiled and I felt joyful and free, ready to journey to the city of perfect croissants and beautiful

buildings.” For me, creating music can only add to an experience, even if that means releasing tears and frustration, and I will always feel more free after I play piano.



## Conclusion

Using music with purpose and intention is an inherently emotional and personal practice, one that requires us to get comfortable being vulnerable with ourselves. We must raise awareness to how specific music makes us feel, honor those feelings and respond to them with specific changes in order to use music as a tool to make ourselves feel more empowered. Understanding your music triggers—the ways you have been impacted by and formed a relationship with music in specific moments throughout your life—is an opportunity to realize the changes that need to be made in your musical experience. If becoming empowered is a process of remembering the power that is already inside us, widening our awareness to that which we already know, and vulnerability is not a choice but instead a pillar of life that allows us to engage with ourselves and others, then vulnerability is a spark for empowerment. Harnessing the potential for music to make us more vulnerable, even just to ourselves and our own feelings, is therefore a significant element of using music as an intentional tool for your own empowerment.

So how can we use this knowledge, that music is an effective tool for self-empowerment if used intentionally, to resituate music in our lives? We must first ignite a commitment to care for ourselves, to consciously try to empower ourselves, and hold that commitment in two hands with music's value and utility. Next, we must name and value music's specific attributes that make it a tool for self-empowerment. Witnessing the ways music widens our awareness, makes us feel seen and lives by our side like a lifelong companion (three of music's remarkable qualities,) makes clear several tangible pieces that demonstrate how music has capacity to empower. May we pick up these

pieces and realize them as attributes of music, ones that build music into a tool we can claim agency over for our everyday healing.

In order to delve into music's capacity to empower, I have put forward my own experiences, both emotional and embodied, and explored several unique attributes of music as a tool through the thoughts of experts in Music Therapy. The process of conceiving this thesis has brought several of my core values to the surface, and, as I continue to learn, it has become increasingly clear that among my other developing core values—commitment to joy, truthfulness, empathetic justice—is an urge to empower myself and others to live our lives more freely. While I have experienced music as empowering for much of my life, formulating the ideas in this thesis helped me grasp a new understanding: that, with future study and practice, I can use my connection to music to support this developing core value. Over the last two years, I have considered the field Music Therapy as an appealing path to further my learning around the topics I'm most interested in, and one that seems like it might suit my strengths and values. Writing this thesis has made the idea of studying and hopefully, eventually practicing Music Therapy an even more exciting and plausible thought for my future. I feel strongly that music is an inherent part of my wholeness. This thesis aims to put words to the ideas and understandings that I feel with music, in hopes of activating others to consider their own relationships with music. Though I cannot speak beyond my own experience of this body of work, I believe it is meaningful to recognize these ideas and experiences in order to start living with music in a different way.

## **Coda: A Testament to the Process**

The first seed of inspiration for this thesis came as a result of this question: What is the purpose of music? Of course, more questions followed: Why do composers write music? Do they have some united intention that drives their creative process? Why is music such a universal artform? I cannot begin to describe, or even partially know, why all composers choose to write music, but I do have a theory: music is written with the intention to affect people's emotions, somatic experience and sense of community. If music exists in our lives with the intention to create a response, should we not acknowledge this response in all its dimensions, emotional, physical and collective? Furthermore, should we not investigate how this response affects our greater lives?

From there I considered: how does music make me feel? The answer, of course, is an infinite collection of emotions, somatic feelings and experiences, but overall, I could settle on a single concept. Music makes me feel empowered. The way I use music in my life makes me feel more like myself. Playing music and feeling connected to my lifelong identity as a musician makes me feel alive. And what is the feeling of being empowered if not a felt connection to your human self, alive in the world, and the living world around you? To me, the phenomenon of music is inextricably tied to this definition of empowerment.

In considering the relationship between music and empowerment, I realized just how loudly this connection echoes in my life. Music propels me through schoolwork, can calm me down on the verge of a panic attack, helps me accomplish the smallest of tasks on mornings when everything feels heavy, helps me form deeper connections with

the people around me and makes my memories more vivid. In short, music empowers me daily. So how can I zoom in and investigate how to use music intentionally as a tool for self-empowerment? How can I break this idea down into digestible steps that can make a difference in others' lives? These are the questions I started with, and the ones I hope to answer in this thesis.

### **Wrestling with Myself in the Process**

While creating this thesis, I wrestled with these questions, but I also wrestled with myself. My own insecurities, doubts, relational challenges, bad habits and inconsistent energy levels 'got in the way' of writing this thesis many times, both practically and conceptually. But this process has also brought so many moments of growth. Below are notes and poems of encouragement, care, discovery, joy and love I wrote myself to get through the process of conceptualizing and writing this thesis. I provide these self-directed notes as a lens into this thesis; my hope is that they will outline some of my interests and show some of my struggle throughout the evolution of this project. Let these notes stand as a purposely vulnerable disclosure of my real process and serve as testament to the internal self-empowerment processes that sustained and nourished me on this journey.

### *growing thoughts on choices*

This thesis has always been about collecting stories. Do these stories have to come from people I know in my community? Perhaps I can collect stories that are already written. Accounts of how music has shown up in people's lives, the effect it has had on them, their community. Perhaps I can advocate that music is a tool for empowerment through these stories that already exist.

And can I construct an argument for how we might use music effectively and intentionally as a tool for empowerment? Perhaps. There are music therapy journals that discuss this. Is music therapy a keen example of how music is used intentionally as a tool for empowerment? How can we take ownership of that tool or must we seek to redesign individual frameworks that are specific to each of our lives so that we can empower ourselves intentionally through music?

Can I look at and listen to each of these stories and then extract and identify ways the people in them are being intentional? Or perhaps I can draw a through line and outline ways they effectively empower themselves and others with music?

### *thoughts on how to write*

Thinking about how to write (or how I should write) often paralyzes me. The writing process becomes the overthinking loop. But reading and listening to Brené Brown in *Daring Greatly* and Glennon Doyle in *Untamed* (really great books by the way) is getting me thinking again, in a more productive way. Brené Brown writes from her own research, in this flowing confident and radical cadence, citing her own experiences and what many other humans have earnestly told her. Glennon Doyle writes like she is discovering as she unfolds her own story, she writes the words in her head moment by moment, she describes her feelings as vividly as possible and she takes you by the hand to show you how she happened upon her moments of true knowing.

Brené Brown and Glennon Doyle are friends in real life. Their writing is so starkly different and yet it yields many of the same lessons. I can write however is right for me. My unique voice is key here, I need to trust it.

Write like it's poetry Ivy, just get it out there and don't worry. You almost always like it afterwards.

***stop thinking now***

I can do this. These pages are just a part of my process and I'm going to enjoy creating them. I'm going to let them flow, with inertia, excitement, focus—holding confidence in my now and in my ability to change.

These pages are just a written account of my thoughts, my wonderful meetings with people that care about this too, the support I have and will continue to have in this process, my excitement, my hope and my competency. I will do this.

I am not beholden to these words or any others. Things will flow and sometimes they will not—I will get through it both ways. Maybe these ideas and thinkings will translate wonderfully into doings and discoverings and maybe, most likely as we can always rely on our change, they will keep evolving, mixing and adapting, and they will turn out exactly as they're meant to.

***a note to your morning self, you can do hard things***

*First, turn on the Spotify playlist Morning Acoustic.*

Good morning tired eyes and unsettled stomach, I believe in you. I believe in your ability to breathe through this moment. Even more, I believe in your wholeness and capability.

Sit here and focus. This is only writing. This is not a life's work. Here now at your fingertips is only a moment's work. A specific moment's work. Why not honor this extraordinary moment by focusing on it's specificity? By just letting your ideas pour out this morning.

Breathe. Get through it. It may not be comfortable and that is okay.

***my own brain: wisdom from Jordan***

When you read a book, you enter into someone else's brain. And that is wonderful! And also totally consuming. Of course it makes your head spin and your sense of grounded self swirl. Your empathy takes the driver's seat and you tend to become consumed in their world of thought.

Remember this: you have so much knowing about this topic in your own brain and your own body. Don't let stepping into someone else's world make you question your own knowing and experience. You have a very good handle on this. Stop questioning your own perspective. It is valid and worthy of interest and care and expansive thought.

I am not a music therapist, but I am a music lover, a lifelong musician, and music is integral to every part of my past and present life.

So listen to yourself. Know that your experience and thoughts are worthy of being written down. Right now.

***to Ivy: from Glennon Doyle and trusting that you have good ideas***

Your thesis can stand as a testament to music as an empowering experience by offering ideas, knowing, tips and steps for using music intentionally in everyday life. This can benefit others, just as you wanted. Your ideas are good ideas. You can weave this music manual with the threads of your own experience, your lifetime of knowing through music. This will stand. This is worthy.

You and your knowing and your ideas and your use of this imperfect tool of language—this is all worthy.

Believe it, let it propel you. Jump in head first, it's time and you can really do this. Stop thinking now, again and again. Just write it out. In these moments, in every moment where the energy comes.

*this thesis*

I am not a writer by trade or nature or choice. Words are never quite exactly it for me. But they can be pieces, meaningful pieces.

This thesis is challenging to write because words are especially never-quite-exactly-it for me when I exist with music. Music is embodied. Music is knowing. Music is deep love in my chest. Music is my constant companion.

So, I'm not going to get it perfect. What can I do then?

I can write about it in moments. I can hear others' knowing and write about my own. Notice the "write about" in that sentence. My knowing about everything, particularly music, is wordless. It is deeper and beyond and exactly right here in my body.

A song takes something so simple—in this moment, the lyrics "*hold on, love will come*" from *Hold On* by the Gospel Whiskey Runners—and brings it to a place where I truly hear it. I sit with it, turn it over in my hands, build a relationship with how it feels in my body. I attach it to moments of my existence when I felt a specific way. It has to be specific; I am specific and living a life is specific.

Music doesn't complicate, it simplifies. Things are still not easy, but they are simpler. The chorus cycles over and over. It keeps telling me to listen. It brightens the light in my eyes.

And then the song ends. It does not obsess. It may work something over or through, but it will always end.

Music is not stuck. It keeps going until it is turned off. Even then, silence can bring peace and time for sinking in.

Music makes me both held and free. In each personal struggle, each hard element of the human condition, music holds me, but never too tightly. I am always free too, existing with music reminds me of this.



Things will come and go and distract you. Many things will try to pull you out of your body, away from your knowing and into your racing mind. They will come and you cannot stop them. This is the flow of each day, each week, each moment of existence. And, you can return here. Remember that your body is home. Your knowing is found in here. You can never get it perfect, words are never exactly it. So stop trying to make them something they simply are not. Words are just a tool you are learning how to use. Let them be what they are.

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