

# a cradle of sound

The relationship between music and healing has been well documented. Recent studies conclude that harp music can play a special role in the recovery of hospital patients.

**Christina Tourin and Kathy Widenhouse** extol the virtues of healing with harps.

**t**ed, a 17-year-old boy with a terminal brain tumour, had been in a coma in San Diego's Scripps Mercy Hospital for weeks. I sat next to his bed, playing songs on my harp that I thought he might recognise – music by Incubus and Sarah McLaughlin – since I knew that comatose patients often respond to familiar tunes. But nothing happened.

As I prepared to end the session, I stood in silence, my fingers resting on the harp strings and my mind in the space of Inclusive Attention, thinking, 'What is willing to meet me?' My hands

began playing the song, *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

By the end of the piece, Ted's mouth was moving in rhythm with the song. The Intensive Care Unit nurses summoned his parents. Within an hour, Ted had opened his eyes and mouthed the tune's lyrics. I returned to Ted's bedside regularly with my harp until the day he was airlifted to his hometown.

That breakthrough experience with Ted is just one example of how harp therapy has become so effective in hospitals, hospices, birthing centres, rehabilitation clinics, long-term care facilities, dental offices and a host of other venues to support patients' healing. It has emerged as a complementary treatment of choice in the last two decades throughout the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Japan, Australia and Europe.

I first realised that harp therapy was powerful in 1990, when I played my harp by my hospitalised father's bedside after



## using the harp for healing

“  
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 ”



**Harmonious harps:** Help patients of all ages

his triple bypass surgery. As I played, doctors noticed significant decreases in my dad's too-rapid heart rate, along with increased oxygenation levels. That experience of healing repeated itself over and over again as I shared my harp music with other patients in the hospital.

**Why harp therapy is so effective**

For centuries, the beneficial relationship between music and healing has been well documented. According to Sarajane Williams, psychologist and author of *The Mythic Harp* (Silva Vocat Music, 2000), the harp has been used for thousands of years as a therapeutic and 'magical' instrument.

Recently, a study conducted by the San Diego Hospice concluded that harp music helps 71 per cent of patients to breathe more easily and reduces anxiety levels in

84 per cent of patients. In addition, 63 per cent of patients report reduction in pain when harp music is present.

With the value of harp therapy no longer ignored, health providers point to why customised harp music is beneficial. Although harp practitioners are not trained to diagnose and change behaviour, their goal is to promote the patient's emotional, physical, mental and spiritual healing – with harp music as the medium. Harp therapy embraces the spiritually intrinsic value of music.

Therapeutic harp practitioners use a small harp at the bedside. They are not performers; they are facilitators. As practitioners play they may offer interaction, which can be very empowering for the patient. For example, I

once worked with a seven-year-old burn victim who was in traumatised shock. She had lost her parents in a house fire. Yet it was the harp that brought her back to life. She was able to lift her hand and pluck a string – and a smile broke out across her face.

Another notable effect of harp therapy is the way the music calms and relaxes individuals involved. It touches a special place in patients' hearts and can bring comfort to family members. Harp practitioner Cyndi Bickel once played for a young woman hallucinating during treatment for bone cancer. As the patient cried out in fear and pain, her husband gently encouraged her, 'Just listen to the music'. Both were able to calm down and rest peacefully.

**Creating a 'cradle of sound'**

But probably the greatest achievement of harp therapy is the ability to provide a 'cradle of sound' for the individual patient. Practitioners explore each patient's situation creatively and then design a soothing musical environment to enhance their quality of life.

This personal music is a blanket of love that matches and caresses the patient's mood, breathing patterns, musical style preferences and resonant tone. The 'cradle of sound' helps the patient achieve relaxation, reduced anxiety, and a state of wellbeing that elevates his mental, emotional and spiritual health.

**Moods:** Western music is built on seven types of scales, or modes, which establish moods. Harp practitioners choose a mode that creates a setting that is helpful to the patient. For example, the Ionian mode (which listeners recognise as a major scale) is light, sweet and gentle – especially useful when the harpist is playing for babies in the Neonatal Intensive Care unit. The Dorian mode has a 'grounding' or 'rooted' quality, and practitioners use it to help patients who are trying to get out of bed, are disoriented, or for those with ADHD.

**Breathing patterns:** By watching a patient's breathing, the practitioner can match it with a rhythmic meter (2/4, 4/4, and 6/8, for example). Playing along with the patient's breathing pattern allows his rhythm to regulate, and where appropriate, slow to a more desired level.

**Music preferences:** Harp practitioners master a repertoire of tunes in 12 musical genres – Patriotic, Children's, Classical, Opera, Ethnic, Country/western, 'Oldies', Popular, Broadway, Hymns, Celtic music and Holiday songs. They are also skilled in improvisational techniques. Knowledge of songs that were popular during a person's youth or courtship years can be a valuable tool in communication, as in the case with therapy for Alzheimer's patients.

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# Practitioners design a soothing musical environment to enhance the patients' quality of life

**Resonant tone:** Practitioners work to find harp tone frequencies that cause sympathetic vibrations in the patient's body. They may start by determining the patient's basic tone of his speaking voice. Then, cycling around the musical circle of fifths, the practitioner finds the correct relationship of tones that resonate with that individual. Using these tones allows the patient to experience the connection of interrelated moving energy between two sources – herself and the music.

## International Programme

Practitioners who offer harp therapy services vary widely in expertise and methodology. Some musicians simply perform by the bedside. Others use passive therapy, with little patient participation, as a vehicle for healing. The most sophisticated therapeutic harp practitioners recognise the need to combine the science of physics with the spirit of music when treating the whole patient. They connect moods, breathing patterns, musical preferences, resonant tone and when appropriate, involve the patient interactively and give them an opportunity to play the harp. Advanced training is required for individuals to develop these kinds of skills and knowledge, which augment their compassion to serve.

The International Harp Therapy Programme was founded in 1994 to meet the obvious growing need for trained practitioners. In this year-long course, students study Music Development, Counselling Skills, Music Therapy issues, Self-care, Resonant Kinesiology, Inclusive Attention, Hospital Etiquette and procedures, the Dying Process and Subtle Energies.

Material is covered in two one-week modules, held at various locations across the country. The remainder of the course is conducted through video study, readings, and a practical internship. Currently, more than 350 students have completed the programme and are now active practitioners across the globe.

Students come from two backgrounds:

**Harpists:** Those who already know how to play the harp draw on their musical skills while developing therapy and counselling techniques. In many cases, they learn that 'less is more' in this type of playing – that while harp therapy is not a musical performance, it is about the beauty and simplicity of pure tones creating harmony.

**Caregivers:** Individuals with bedside experience learn to bring a musical dimension to their care giving. They already understand 'patient need'. Although these students may take longer to develop harp repertoire and musical confidence, they catch onto improvisation quickly.

Without exception, those drawn to harp therapy share one common trait: they are deeply compassionate humanitarians. They find tremendous fulfilment in helping others hold onto the spiritual realm of their life's path. But one of the biggest challenges a harp practitioner faces is not having enough time to meet with everyone who requests her services. One solution? Increased global awareness to meet the escalating need.



**Worldwide recognition:** International Harp Therapy Programme



**Class of 2002:** World Harp Orchestra

## Global ventures

Today harp therapy is going global. In 2004, 70 harp practitioners came together to participate in the World Harp Orchestra®, in an event designed to increase awareness of worldwide hunger and billed as, 'Harping on Hunger'. They will convene once again for a large-scale musical extravaganza in 2006 to benefit the United Nations World Food Programmes. While the spotlight of these events is on aiding the battle against world hunger, the harp is the healing medium.

The next global venture is to recruit young players from over 200 countries to create the World Harp Youth Orchestra®, who will harp together for world peace.

Healing with the harp has been a natural part of the instrument's evolution. From ancient hillsides to concert halls through its contemporary journey into homes and hospital rooms, the harp captures the hearts and souls of those who need relief, hope and enlightenment. As awareness of the therapeutic value of this magical instrument grows, so will its cradle of sound bring increasing healing and comfort to the hearts of mankind. **ks**

## more information

- Join Christina Tourin and Kathy Widenhouse in Ireland in July for harp therapy training. To find out more about harp therapy or The International Harp Therapy Training programme, to locate a practitioner near you, or to prepare to enrol in the World Harp Orchestras, log onto The International Harp Therapy Programme's official website: <http://harprealm.com>
- For a creative and fun experience, play virtual harp on-line by going to <http://playharp.com>
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