

## The Feeling is Musical

### Episode #001 | What is Music Therapy?

**Erica:** Welcome, friends! You're listening to The Feeling is Musical — as presented by the Snohomish County Music Project. My name is Erica Lee, and today, we are talking about: What is Music Therapy, with my good friend, and board certified music therapist, Vee Fansler.

Vee is a board-certified music therapist working with children, youth, and families in transition. Additionally, with five years of clinical experience, they supervise music therapy staff and interns as senior music therapist at the Snohomish County Music Project. In the final stages of their Masters in Music Therapy, their work centers trauma-informed care and the political nature of therapy, highlighting the ecological link between individual and communal well-being.

#### [Podcast intro music plays]

Erica: Let's dive in!

**Vee:** Yeah!

**Erica:** We're gonna talk about ... what is music therapy! This is like an everyday conversation nearly for us. Um... So I know that I have my like quick definition that I give to people on a regular basis, and there's a legalistic definition that the national music therapy organization puts out... In your work, how do you define music therapy? Or how do you conceptualize music therapy?

**Vee:** Mmm. Okay, so I think that... music therapy is founded on this basic premise that, when you combine relationships and music, there's a unique capacity for change. So it's really super broad, and not all things that involve relationships and music are music therapy. But we can draw on our understandings of things outside the work to help conceptualize the work.

So... everyone has some type of experience that they can point to, where they were in relationship with, you know, someone or with a group of people, and where music has been the catalyst for something. So music is part of culture, and culture is how to - part of how we be human... And that looks so different, depending on our cultural context and all of that... But we might have religious experiences where music is a important factor. We might connect with friends by sharing music we like and dislike - sending mixed CDs like when I was in high school —

**Erica:** [Laughs]

**Vee:** [Laughs] Um... It... For those of us who play and perform music, playing music with other people is a huge part of how we even forge relationships.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Vee:** Yeah, so... That - we - we can tell from these almost universal experiences, where they differ culturally and based on us as individuals, but where there's a common thread of music and relationship really being fundamental in the ways that we connect with each other and with the kind of world more broadly, and even kind of spiritually, and things like that. So... music therapy, in how I conceptualize it, is just that... we want to harness that power, that really unique power, that comes from that combination of relationships and music, and we're gonna move intentionally towards some type of individual or collective well-being. And that can look so different, but the mechanism through which it happens, which is music and relationship, is the thing we're really honing in on in music therapy.

**Erica:** Mmm.

**Vee:** And then, uniquely, you know as opposed to those other experiences I talked about, in music therapy, the idea is also that you can do that in some type of contained space. You can trust maybe the expertise of the person that you're with, and where you can trust the boundaries of the space to hold whatever that thing is, and the intention of the space to be directed toward whatever that type of change or well-being or growth is.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Vee:** Yeah.

**Erica:** So, if you're like googling music therapy, how do you ensure that the person that you are hiring or trusting —

**Vee:** Mmm —

**Erica:** As your music therapist is trained to do all these things —

**Vee:** Mmm —

**Erica:** To hold all these boundaries —?

**Vee:** Yeah. Yeah! I - I guess yeah, also, training is something that sets it apart as a field of practice, as opposed to... other types of experiences.

**Erica:** Sure.

**Vee:** If... people... you know, this is not to diss on community music or —

**Erica:** No.

**Vee:** Other types of... music education, other types of music experiences, but, in conceiving of music therapy itself, there is this sort of credentialing process that just at least gives some type of accountability and some... clarity of definition around what we're talking about when we mean music therapy.

Um, so in the U.S., which is where we're based, we have a 4-year bachelors program in music therapy - as the degree. Or, if people have a music degree of another kind, you can sometimes get an equivalency degree, which is a 1-year or 2-year process, just focusing on that music therapy-specific —

**Erica:** Mmhmm —

**Vee:** Stuff. And then, at the close of that academic work, there's a full-time 6-month internship. It's 1020 hours, so... for our interns here, that often looks more like 7 months... because, you know, they get —

**Erica:** Holidays, vacations —

**Vee:** Yeah —

**Erica:** Etc, etc.

**Vee:** Exactly.

**Erica:** Yes.

**Vee:** So, then there's a 6-month-ish, full-time-ish internship, [chuckles] um, and then, once you complete the internship, as long as all goes well, then you can sit for the board exam to get nationally board-certified as a music therapist. Um... Outside of the U.S., there's similar types of tracks but it's not exactly the same. And there's similar types of equivalencies to, you know, when someone says... someone's name, MT-BC that stands for Music Therapist- Board-Certified in the U.S., and and there's similar equivalents outside of the U.S.

**Erica:** Absolutely.

**Vee:** Mmhmm.

**Erica:** Yeah. So, for somebody that's never been to see a music therapist or witnessed a session —

**Vee:** Mmm —

**Erica:** What kinds of things can they expect... when they go to a session?

**Vee:** Um... Music therapists do - do all sorts of things - it's so different depending on context. So —

**Erica:** The context matters.

**Vee:** The context absolutely - in my paradigm, the context abso - absolutely defines the content of the sessions. So... music itself is culturally grounded, in many ways, like not only in terms of ethnic music, but in terms of like all of our identities and experiences have ways that they can weave into musical content —

**Erica:** Mmm.

**Vee:** And... then the institutions that we're in, or if we're based in the community, if we're doing individual things, or group things, like all of that shapes what happens in the content. Because it's the systems of all the relationships of all the people in the space, and our relationships to the music.

**Erica:** Mmm.

**Vee:** So —

**Erica:** Okay, so given that —

**Vee:** Right. So common threads, right [chuckles] —

**Erica:** What are some general things that happen in a session —

**Vee:** People... often, it —

Erica: Types of activities?

**Vee:** Actively playing music, so, um... people improvise with their music therapist on a piano, or on Orff instruments like xylophones or things like that, or drums. People might sing - so active music play like that, with, again, sort of intention behind it —

**Erica:** Mmm —

**Vee:** Um, that's not specifically to learn the instrument or perform it. But, it's about the process of being together in those. Or, you know, sort of processing maybe something that's happening emotionally in the music... things like that. So you can do active musical play. Sometimes music therapy is more like listening to a song and then talking about it. Um, and then the latter part might look like a traditional counseling or talk therapy type of session. Um... sometimes, there are things with um... the music shaping the environment that we're in. So like, in a NICU, obviously we're not like, hit the drum, baby- tiny child. [Chuckles]

**Erica:** [Chuckles]

**Vee:** Um, there's things that are more about how the environment shapes —

**Erica:** Mmm —

**Vee:** Things like that. Um... Yeah.

**Erica:** Is music therapy... um, okay, so, say like I'm used to talking to mental health therapists —

**Vee:** Mmm —

**Erica:** I mean, personally I went to counselors for many years —

**Vee:** Mmhmm —

**Erica:** For my personal issues, if I wanted to see a music therapist, can music Therapy can music therapy apply to anyone? Is there something that music therapy is better at than other things?

**Vee:** Mmm, yeah.

**Erica:** Does that make sense?

**Vee:** Right, so... I - I guess in theory, music therapy could apply to anyone, because... everyone has sort of goals and things they might like to work for - toward. And um, communities - we as communities may have things that we want to work toward. And music therapy can be integrated into each of those, at least in theory.

**Erica:** Mmm.

**Vee:** Um, it doesn't mean that it's the best or the right fit for each person individually, or even each community. Um... But, yeah, absolutely - music therapy could address similar things to what people approach in counseling or talk therapies.

And one thing that is unique about music is that it allows us to process things nonverbally. So especially - we'll talk about this later - but especially since trauma impacts the brain in such a way that sometimes, when we're in a mode of like a flashback, or really in the moment of remembering - having like a traumatic memory - the Broca's Area of our brain that makes words... essentially turns off. It's not an electrical circuit but [laughs] —

**Erica:** [Laughs]

**Vee:** It - we can't really access it.

**Erica:** Uh huh.

**Vee:** So the fact that we try to get people to go to therapy and talk about our traumas to process them can be really challenging. Um, or even for, you know, for some of my clients who are younger, they don't have the verbal processing or capacity for that to be a primary way of processing things that have happened to them —

**Erica:** Absolutely, yeah —

**Vee:** Yeah. Then a nonverbal way of communicating can... give us access to... our memories in a way that also includes grounding us in the moment —

**Erica:** Mmm —

**Vee:** Or in a way that gives us different ways of communicating that might be more um... intuitive for us, kind of individually or culturally again. Um, so that's one thing that can make music therapy uniquely appropriate for someone.

**Erica:** Wow. Do you have to be able to play an instrument - this is like my number one question I receive from people —

**Vee:** Oh! —

**Erica:** Is do I have to be able to play an instrument.

**Vee:** Right, no. No no no.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Vee:** It's not like [chuckles] therapy for musicians - only.

**[Erica and Vee laugh]**

**Vee:** Yeah, so I mean... it - like, you know, there are some schools of thought that are like - all people are musicians. SO, in that sense yes, you know, everyone can music. Everyone can engage with music. Um, and there are a lot - there's a really expansive way, you know... we can be really expansive in the ways we think about what it even means to engage with music —

**Erica:** Mmhmm —

**Vee:** So sometimes, especially with, you know, with like sort of western - um - music school kind of ideas, it can be like, okay, making music means like being a piano performer and being —

**Erica:** Yeah, this virtuoso —

**Vee:** Right —

**Erica:** Playing like grand pieces of music —

**Vee:** Right —

**Erica:** And yeah.

**Vee:** But, musical experiences also - are also like singing "Happy Birthday" to mark - you know, rituals that go with those experiences.

**Erica:** Yeah, "Ring Around the Rosie" - hopscotch games at recess —

**Vee:** Yeah. And even moving um, you know, even moving our bodies has music to it. The social rhythms of how we engage with each other—

**Erica:** Mmm —

**Vee:** Have musical elements.

**Erica:** Absolutely.

**Vee:** The back and forth like tones that parents and babies use with each other have communicative musicality. So even when a parent's not like singing to a baby, the fact that a baby can go [makes crying noise] and a mom can go [makes soothing noise] —

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Vee:** These are all musical aspects that are harnessed - that can be harnessed in a music therapy space.

**Erica:** Yeah. I just thought of an - as you were giving all those examples, I just thought of the way we give our telephone numbers.

**Vee:** Mmm

**Erica:** The pattern, the rhythm we say [makes a rhythmic phrase on the sound 'duh']]

**Vee:** Yeah! Mmhmm!

**Erica:** Yeah. And everybody, mostly in American culture, I don't know about European and other cultures —

**Vee:** Mmm —

**Erica:** Um, but we all do it that way.

**Vee:** That order, yeah.

**Erica:** If somebody doesn't do it that way, in that rhythm and cadence —

**Vee:** Yeah, it will throw you off [chuckles.] —

**Erica:** Then we're like, what is this? [Chuckles]

**Vee:** Yeah.

**Erica:** Yeah, yeah.

**Vee:** Yeah, I - I - wrote this paper on entrainment, which is about how - it's about rhythm and how things match rhythm... I wrote it in college, and there was this quote I loved, that I can't remember exactly, but it was basically like... that rhythm - like life is a surging polyrhythm, meaning that all of our life is just rhythms upon rhythms upon rhythms, layered onto each other in ways that match and clash - much more than this idea that there's like sort of some static thing, and every once in a while rhythms are layered onto it.

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Vee:** Yeah.

**Erica:** Yeah, I like that. Music is everywhere.

**Vee:** Mmhmm.

**Erica:** You're musicking whether you realize you're musicking or not.

**Vee:** Exactly!

**Erica:** Yeah.

**Vee:** Yeah!

**Erica:** Yes. Well, thank you so much for being here and sharing with us. Vee will be here for many more episodes.

**Vee:** Mmhmm.

**Erica:** I think... we're recording this really early, but I think, quote unquote tomorrow, or next week. —

**Vee:** [Chuckles]

**Erica:** On the next episode, Vee will be talking about social justice in music therapy.

**Vee:** Mmm.

**Erica:** And Vee will be back again to talk about music in the brain, and a few other topics.

**Vee:** Right.

**Erica:** So this is not the last of Vee. [Laughs] Vee is coming back.

**Vee:** Yeah! We can call it good right now, yeah. [Chuckles]

**Erica:** Cool, awesome. Well, thank you so much for talking with us. And thank you, listeners, for joining us on this very first episode of The Feeling is Musical.

If you would like to learn more about music therapy, we will include some further resources on our website, at S, as-in Sam, C, as in Cat, Music Project dot org (SCMusicProject.org). You can also follow the Snohomish County Music Project on all social media at SCMusicProject. And we will talk to you next time!

**[Podcast outro plays]**