

Sound Messages in Music Therapy at Psychosomatic Specialty Clinic Medical Park Chiemseeblick

by Dr. Christina Koller – in conversation with Bärbel Kirst

A personal journey turns into a career

Bärbel Kirst comes from a family that often made music together, and thus music and movement have always played an important role in her life. The trained sports and dance instructor experienced the healing effects of sound firsthand on her own body. At the age of 11, she and her twin sister suffered an accident in which they fell onto concrete from a height of 4 meters *“At that time, I heard sounds – primal sounds. And I searched for these from then on”*, she says. She learned to play many instruments. In the vibraphone, or in the free warm up and sounding of one of the choirs she leads, she found similar sounds. The clear sounds of the vibraphone played an especially important role when, approx. 13 years ago, her life was disrupted by a serious illness. *“The music, the simple sounds saved my life”*, she says, reflecting on her recovery which paved the way for her professional career as a music therapist. Several years later, she completed the education and training for Peter Hess® Sound Massage.

The same year, she accepted a position as music therapist in the psychosomatic specialty clinic Medical Park Chiemseeblick. Her superior at the time, Chief Physician Dr. G., was very open to new methods, and she was consequently able to integrate sound massage into her music therapy. *“Together, we initiated several approaches that we evaluated via biofeedback (measurements of heart rate variability, skin conductivity, etc.). The observable effects of the sound massages we carried out were so positive that he said: ‘If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn’t have believed it was possible.’ Building on this positive remark and supported by the many positive comments from patients, the new method was also quickly accepted by colleagues,”* she says looking back on this time. Today, six years later, “singing bowl therapy” (within the context of individual music therapy), is firmly established in the prescription catalog of the clinic. The feedback on singing bowls by patients is consistently positive, and they are regarded as a special “highlight”, as comments from both patients and colleagues repeatedly confirm.

Therapeutic approach with sound

Patients who come to Bärbel Kirst for music therapy are generally patients who were referred by their physician or psychologist to the clinic based on a diagnosis of psychosomatic illness in accordance with ICD-10. These often include depression and burnout. Patient stays range from three to six weeks, sometimes up to three months. In the clinic, they are prescribed various therapies. Singing bowl therapy, as sound massage is called at the clinic, is one of these therapies. Most patients have a session once a week and thus come three to four times during their entire stay.

Regarding her work with singing bowls, Bärbel Kirst reports: *“My therapeutic approach is characterized by a strong resource and solution orientation. It is important to me that I support people in the process of recognizing what is good for them – and that’s what I try to reinforce. I try to impart a feeling of ‘I am well’ rather than continually focusing only on the problems. This change in focus is a very significant part of the therapy process, and the sounds of the singing bowls can provide valuable services in this area. Moreover, it is important to me that patients recognize that only they can do something for themselves and that I cannot do it for them.*

In our initial meeting, I talk about music therapy with my patients and my special sound massage therapy. I often mention Masaru Emoto (cf. The Hidden Messages of Water, Koha Verlag, 2002) and his photos of water crystals. Depending on whether the person across from is more oriented towards rational thinking or is already very open-minded, I delve into this topic more deeply. Independent from that, patients always find these explanations very interesting. With people who are more skeptical, I have the impression that this theoretical background makes it easier for them to accept the therapy. Before we start with the actual sound session, I always advise patients to let me know immediately if they are not feeling well.



"Singing bowl therapy" (in individual music therapy) is one of the therapies offered at the Psychosomatic Specialty Clinic Medical Park Chiemseeblick.

I start the actual sound massage very traditionally, at the patient's feet while he/she is in a prone position. The upper back is next, followed by the pelvic area, and then the second singing bowl. For about 30 to 35 minutes, patients can simply enjoy the sounds – generally while we are both silent. In contrast to basic sound massage, I do not ask patients to turn over in between. Based on the biofeedback results I mentioned earlier and my experiences, I noticed that this has the potential to disrupt the deep relaxation we have achieved. For some patients, for example, those with a pacemaker or women with breast implants, I conduct the therapy with the patient in supine position, but that is a rarity. The almost spherical sounds of the "zephyr" (a type of chime) signal the end of the sound session. I always allow 10 minutes or so after the session for a follow-up conversation. But what I see over and over again is that people achieve such a deep level of relaxation during a sound massage that they do not wish to speak immediately afterwards. Then I recommend that they continue to concentrate on themselves and the experience. But sometimes, they want to share their experience with me or tell me about life situations that arose during the sound massage and relate to their hospitalization."

The sounds enable new experiences

Bärbel Kirst explains: *"You can't ever predict what will happen in a sound massage – it is not assessable and always remains very personal and varied depending on the situation. But from discussions with psychologists, it becomes clear that sound therapy can lead to a turning point in the patient's course of treatment. The soft sounds enable a being-touched-sensation that elicits receptiveness – a willingness to define new goals and make a change."*

According to Bärbel Kirst, patient reactions are very varied:

- some patients dream, say "that was beautiful" – and are incredulous that something so wonderful exists;
- some are simply relieved that their scattered thoughts quiet down;
- some just giggle or feel a sensation of weightlessness;
- some are full of drive to do something following a sound massage,
- and occasionally, there are tears of emotion or amazement.

"The various effects are reflected in different ways in the therapeutic process", per the music therapist. "For some patients, the experience of being able to relax is a small miracle. Especially when their relaxation becomes increasingly deep with each massage. During a sound massage, they experience that change can occur without pain or without pressure. This experience can be a watershed moment and bring about the already mentioned change in focus. People get an idea along the lines of 'this is how it could be – that's where I want to get to'. They experience self-efficacy thereby; they recognize that they can actively shape something on their own. Many patients quiet their random thoughts during a sound massage or generate new thoughts. And for some, it is as though they are awakened through a sound massage. In all cases, the sounds support patients in making contact with themselves – on a physical as well as emotional level."

"Being harmonious"

Based on her many years of experience, Bärbel Kirst hears when something is not "harmonious" – the sounds of the singing bowls reveal to the practiced therapist when a region of the body is severely tensed or blocked and no longer

penetrable. She can "hear" a prolapsed disc and "work on" the associated pain – and often significantly reduce it. With her female patients, the pelvic area often evidences such blockages. Then it is important to inquire further with great sensitivity (and preferably confer with the treating psychologist), because prior sexual abuse or violence may have occurred. But here as well, the sounds often gently unfold their healing potential, and generally without words. At the end of her hospitalization, a Kurdish woman who was a victim of sexual abuse used the following words to describe her experience with sound therapy: *"Sound is the only thing that brings me peace. It lasted longer and longer – up to two days."*

The soft vibrations of the singing bowl relax and unravel

The physical effects of the sounds are as personal and varied as the mental or emotional effects. Of course, relaxation also plays an important role here. Especially with orthopedic patients, Bärbel Kirst works together with the physical therapist. Based on her experience, having patients first undergo physical therapy treatments and then music therapy is beneficial, as this reinforces and supports sustainable effects of relaxation. But patients suffering from pain also benefit from sound therapy. Often she hears statements such as: *"With you, I finally don't need any ibuprofen"*. Following a sound therapy session, Ms. M., a patient with breast cancer, wrote: *"After the treatment, I feel lighter and relaxed. My severe breast pain had simply vanished"*. Other patients report that they were finally able to sleep soundly after singing bowl therapy. There are also successes among tinnitus sufferers. And every now and then, there are the events of "spontaneous healing", a phenomenon that cannot fully be explained.

Sample case:

Dr. U., a former Senior Physician at the clinic reports on his personal experience of spontaneous healing:

"I had developed impingement syndrome in my right shoulder as a result of many years of physical stress. I was no longer able to lift my arm laterally; my symptoms fit the textbook definition of the disorder. For other reasons, Bärbel had invited me for an introduction to sound massage. She first treated my back and touched several tense areas with the singing bowls. Without prior knowledge of my condition, she had recognized my shoulder problems and treated them with specialized bowls and sounds, as she told me later. After the session, she asked me what was going on with my right shoulder because she had the impression something wasn't quite right there.

I found that fascinating – and I told her about my limited range of motion. From a standpoint of academic medicine, I cannot explain this, but surprisingly, two to three days after the sound massage, my shoulder was free of symptoms – I had my full range of motion back."

Many patients wish to continue using the sounds

It is thus not surprising that many patients ask how they can continue singing bowl therapy at home. Bärbel Kirst shows them simple sound exercises that they can do with a singing bowl on their own (cf. Peter Hess: Singing Bowls My Practical Guide, Peter Hess Publisher, 2015) and tells them where they can find accredited Peter Hess® Sound Massage practitioners near them (cf. reference list of certified Peter Hess® Sound Massage practitioners at www.fachverbandklang.de).

Some patients who were recommended follow-up treatments come back. Patients also provide feedback in thank you letters such as this one:

The sounds enable new experiences. Sometimes, they effect a watershed moment in the therapy process.



"Dear Ms. Kirst, Thank you again for your dedicated and personal support. Although I have practiced autogenic training for 40 years as well as other relaxation techniques, I have never achieved such deep and rapid relaxation as I did during singing bowl therapy. The vibrations penetrate the entire body and help it release tension and stress. The relaxation stays with you after treatment. Best regards, S.A."

What makes a sound massage special

In conclusion, I asked Bärbel Kirst what makes a sound massage so special and she replied: *"With sound, I can often reach patients more deeply than with traditional music therapy. In contrast to other music therapies, I find that sound massages are not strenuous. I've done as many as eight sessions in one day. It is enjoyable work and never tiring. And, of course, it's nice to get such positive feedback from my patients and colleagues."*



Bärbel Kirst

is a music therapist, sports and dance instructor, as well as Peter Hess® Sound Massage practitioner. Since 2010, she works as music therapist in the Psychosomatic Specialty Clinic Medical Park Chiemseeblick. She also has her own practice.



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