

LSD, Meditation and Music

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Editor's note

This paper is based on the author's presentation at the [symposium](#) „LSD – problem child and wonder drug“, 13-15th of January, 2006 in Basel

Switzerland. It was presented on January 15th as a keynote at the international symposium for the celebration of the 100th birthday of Albert Hofmann, the discoverer of LSD. Over 1500 people joined this symposium from all over the world and [new research](#) on the medical use of psychedelics, reflections on cultural issues and problems, influence on artists and political issues has been presented by a variety of researchers.

Background

My personal experience:

- First contacts with LSD as a student in Muenster, monitored by Hans-Hinrich Taeger who was preparing a philosophical dissertation on texts for psychedelic music (Taeger, 1988). Thorough preparation involving the text by Timothy Leary and Ralph Metzner „on how to plan psychedelic experiences“ (Leary *et al.*, 1964) and extensive introduction by the trip master .
- Further personal experience as a member of SÄPT (Schweizer Ärztgesellschaft für Psycholytische Therapie/Swiss physicians asso-

ciation for psycholytic therapy): encounter groups with psychoactive substances with, e.g. Ralph Metzner and Peter Hess..

- Two-week shaman excursion to Peru with San Pedro and Ayahuasca rituals (see also De Rios, 2006) under the guidance of Don Eduardo Cameron.

Altered states of consciousness play an important role in music therapy research where I have been active together with music therapists since 1987 . As an active musician I stopped taking psychoactive substances years ago, in accordance with Albert Hofmann who said:

„As soon as the doors of perception are open, you won't need any psychoactive substances.“

Another background for my paper is our Heidelberg research project „Ritual dynamics and salutogenesis in the use and abuse of psychoactive substances“ ([RISA](#)): it covers interviews with adolescents, members of the Santo Daime movement, and with physicians and psychotherapists on personal experience with psychoactive substances.

Over several years I held seminars on criteria of good mediational music at the psychotherapy weeks in Lindau; you find a discography with comments on my website www.rolf-verres.de.

Which kind of music to choose for therapeutical use of LSD?

In his book entitled „LSD-Psychotherapie“ Stanislav Grof (1994)¹ writes that music is an indispensable part of LSD psychotherapy:

„It stimulates strong emotions in many cases and promotes deeper involvement in the psychedelic process. It provides a meaningful

1. Information on a new edition (2006) of this book is available from <http://www.maps.org>; the cited and retranslated extract comes from the German edition of Grof's book, which was published in 1983

structure for the experience and creates a powerful current that helps the patient to overcome difficult moments in sessions and dead ends. Patients often report that the current of music enabled them to give up their mental defense mechanisms and to abandon themselves in their experience without inhibition. Another purpose of music is to provide continuity and relation in the sequence of unusual states of consciousness. (...) A certain choice of music may often support certain emotional qualities like aggressivity, sexuality, the „psychedelic breakthrough“ or a transcendental experience“.

For the selection of music, Grof lists the following criteria, in accordance with Helen Bonny and Walter Pahnke (Bonny & Pahnke, 1972 p. 6):

- The experience should not be governed by any definite pattern. Pieces of highest artistic quality but with little „defined“ content should be preferred.
- Songs or vocal music where the text addresses a certain subject should be avoided, unless the song is in a language unknown to the person in question, so that the human voice may become an unspecific stimulus.
- Grof points out that there is not much danger of manipulation by a certain kind of music since patients' unconscious tendencies would be more effective than external stimuli.

In my opinion, this statement by Grof applies only to carefully monitored sessions in a therapeutic context and not to any uncontrolled drug consumption.

Grof also discusses the choice of music under process-related aspects: in the latent period before the drug becomes effective, he finds soft, flowing and calming music appropriate. After the experience starts, he recommends music of a stimulating and supportive nature. When after about one hour and a half the drug reaches its full effect, he believes the time has come for powerful music that raises emotions. In Spring Grove, they played mainly classical music, e.g. by Skriabin, Brahms, Schumann or Grieg during this phase. When in the fourth hour LSD had reached its strongest influence, this was the opportunity for a strong emotional or

spiritual breakthrough (powerful music of a transcendental nature was particularly suited, e.g. spiritual music by Mozart, Bach or Berlioz). The final phase required soft, relaxed and flowing music of a certain timeless character, e.g. classical guitar and harpsichord compositions, or music by modern composers like Georg Deuter, Paul Horn, Ravi Shankar, and meditational zen music – Grof recommends a whole range of trance-inducing music from a variety of different cultures (see Grof, 1975, 1994).

CULTURE OF ADDICTION AND MUSIC

A completely different aspect, that is, some risks and side effects of certain types of music in the use and abuse of psychoactive substances, was addressed at the 10th World Congress of Music Therapy 2002 in Oxford by the Israelian music therapist Tsvia Horesh. Her paper was entitled „Dangerous Music“. Tsvia Horesh (2006) works with severely drug-addicted and drug-damaged persons in a therapy community in Israel, and she explored destructive and healing forces of popular music in the treatment of people who were considerably damaged by drug abuse. On the basis of the story in Homer’s *Odyssey* about the sirens’ songs she underlines the captivating power of some types of music where the attraction is stronger than any concept of danger. Drug related music can be extremely suggestive and become an element of addiction; she agrees with William White (1996) and points out that excessive drug abuse may be increased by a „culture of addiction“.

We know that the addictive potential of LSD is very small; but in this context I refer to persons who take a host of drugs indiscriminately, one of which may also be LSD. Against this culture of addiction Tsvia Horesh sets a culture of healing where the challenge is to cope with cues and craving. Musical preferences that were intensified under the influence of drugs may serve to maintain unfavourable patterns of abuse – Horesh reports of obsessive music listening even in abstinent periods when an

emotional vacuum is often filled by music. Horesh asked her clients to describe the type of music they felt to be dangerous, and she elicited associations triggered by the music in question. She found heavy metal music associated with the following visions: street fighting, excessive drinking, but also reassurance and release from rage. She also heard of chaotic emotions intensified by an integration of psychedelic experience in the altered state of mind. Even Israeli music coloured by Arab sounds was described as dangerous whenever it expressed melancholy and hopelessness. Tsvia Horesh describes her own part in the withdrawal treatment like that of Circe who helped Odysseus to cope with the sirens as she knew about the mysteries and dangers of the subconscious mind.

Those who want to offer a certain type of music to others for the purposes of psychedelic experience often follow their own preferences. However, it is important to discuss in advance the suitability of the music for the perceptive powers of the person in question. There are music recordings (Cd.s, LPs, etc.) dedicated to Albert Hofmann that are almost heavy metal – although he loves classical music, e.g. the quintett in C major by Franz Schubert (see Verres 2006). And to my knowledge Albert Hofmann has not taken LSD for a long time since his doors of perception are wide open anyway.

Using music and LSD for therapeutic purposes

Going beyond the criteria mentioned by Stanislav Grof, I would like to differentiate between the following aspects that might be important in using LSD:

1. Is the motivation for the LSD experience rather hedonistic, i.e. oriented towards general enjoyment, or directed to a dilatation of consciousness? I believe that a primarily hedonistic motivation should not be generally dismissed. When I was a member of SÄPT, at a time

- when it was still legal to use LSD in SÄPT, I took part in a group experiment supervised by today's president of SÄPT, Dr. Peter Gasser. He used nothing but serene, harmonic and pleasant music, e.g. live guitar music by Dr. [Otto Silber](#) from Konstanz, Germany whose CDs I would like to recommend.
2. Is the LSD trip intended for one person, for two, in a secluded room or as a group experience? For a single experience I recommend the above-mentioned criteria by Stanislav Grof; an erotic experience for two should rather be accompanied by flowing sounds, e.g. the music by Otto Silber or [Sufi music by Oruc Güvenc](#) or unobtrusive pulsing percussion sounds from various continents; prior to any group experiments it should be clear whether the psychedelic trip should have a common theme. In a group of men, for example, the song by [Marie Boine](#) on howling wolves would be as pertinent as music dedicated to the opposite pole of the male principle, i.e. the anima according to CG Jung. Obviously, an abrupt change in thematic focus should be avoided in an encounter group in view of the slow processes in a psychedelic LSD trip; instead, a carefully staged production should correspond to the previously agreed themes for the planned self-experience.
 3. For the careful staging of a group experience it might be useful to follow the criteria for so-called movie sound tracks. I think it is not necessary to enlarge upon this aspect as it is self-evident.
 4. In contrast to what Stanislav Grof writes about the possible suggestive meaning of texts, I would expressly encourage the quotation of texts or the use of music oriented towards lyrical texts for theme-related LSD experiences. Some people wishing to have an LSD experience simply select music that is termed „meditative“ or „psychedelic“ and do not take into account that verbal content may have a very intensive effect. The text on the record „Schwingungen“ by [Ash Ra Tempel](#) from the 1970s contains passages saying that in making music you can swim in the vibrations of the music of the stars and can drink light that hurries through cosmic spaces. „That which lives in you and in us, our vibration is in everything: the paradise that is life“. But the record also contains a title „Flowers must die“ that starts with unstructured flowing sounds and gradually assumes a violently stirring rhythm with a text that is by no means hedonistic or harmonizing but fundamentally political. I use this example to demonstrate that texts may have the same effect as pure music and therefore have to be chosen with care in view of the increased suggestibility in LSD trips.
 5. Psychedelic experiences do not require a sound in the sense of the style of so-called psychedelic music. Basically, almost any kind of music may support psychedelic experience. Sound and stereoscopic effects play an important role and deserve much attention in the choice of musical instruments or amplifiers.

6. Differences between art and kitsch are particularly important in so-called meditative music. The composer [Hans Zender](#) (in Fischer, 1998 p. 107-108) speaks of a

„monstrous soulful trash that appeared recently as so-called ‚meditative music‘ (...); the perfumed and cheaply euphorizing atmosphere of a ‚new age mentality‘ suffocates any creative impulse“.

If and insofar regression takes place within a psychedelic trip it can be uncritical to some extent; but it may also be felt and shaped quite literally as a return to the roots.

7. I refer to Adolf Dittrich (1996, 1998) and his basic categories of altered states of waking consciousness, specifically his differentiation between Oceanic Boundlessness and Dread of Ego Dissolution. In LSD psychotherapy as conceived by Stanislav Grof, so-called horror trips in the sense of dread of ego dissolution are expressly approved provided these experiences are monitored by a professional psychotherapist so that they may be integrated in one's self-concept and personal biography. If we strive for oceanic feelings of security without professional supervision, and originally controlling ego functions dissolve in ecstasy, then it will be important to explore the deeper meanings of the term „regression“. States of blissful infantility, harmony and relaxation may be pleasant. But according to [Martin Mumelter](#) (in Fischer, 1998 p. 110), the way in which ‚meditative music‘ is marketed can exploit the need for regression in such a way that this ‚transcendental trash‘ as he calls it will not support, but ruin our spiritual potential.
8. Are there specific characteristics of ‚spiritual music‘? The logotherapist Otto Zsok writes in his book „Musik und Transzendenz“ (1998):

„Abandoning oneself to a great piece of music is more than delight. It is a liberating, cathartic experience. It is a densely sensual experience (...) This type of experience brings a wealth of light, beauty, truth and a brightening of our reality which we could never reach otherwise.“

In music we feel that our existence on earth is worthwhile.

„While the melody is filling me completely, I perceive how wide the spaces within me really are, how wide and broad my inner emptiness is, how deep and at the same time high the spaces of soul to be conquered.“

And Otto Zsok quotes the theologian Hans Küng as follows:

„You feel that you are completely turned inwards with eyes and ears, body and spirit, and that everything external, all opposition, all division between subject and object, have been overcome.“

Music is no longer opposite but is what comprises, penetrates and entirely fulfils us with delight.“ (Zsok, 1998 p. 132).

A Rumanian professor of musical aesthetics, George Balan, used words that appear very solemn but nevertheless may be understood properly in the context of this congress:

„Entering the holy shrine of music means entering the holy shrine of our own inner life.“ (Zsok, 1998 p. 210).

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me invite you to a very short joint musical experience of about three minutes only where I try with many floating sounds and much air in between, to express some of my thoughts through music.

Download music examples from CD *Lichtungen* recorded by Rolf Verres

[Track 2.mp3 \(7,9 MB\)](#)

[Track 5.mp3 \(7,9 MB\)](#)

(Music by Rolf Verres (piano solo) is available at www.sound-file.de; more information: www.rolf-verres.de)

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