# “Today we Sing for a Different Future”: Therapeutic Songwriting in Early Stage Dementia in Spain, A Group Case Study

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## Abstract

This paper describes a music therapy experience from Terrassa, Spain. A group of 18 participants living with dementia, led by the music therapist, used songwriting during the ending process of a two-year music therapy programme. Two songwriting protocols were combined and adapted to suit the participants. By following step-by-step guidelines, they wrote their first song, creating a meaningful artefact full of their thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Interviews with the participants were conducted four weeks after the experience, to obtain information about the significance of the process. The results suggest a positive impact on participants’ wellbeing, as interview data revealed feelings of joy and happiness. This paper also contributes to the body of literature in this field. I recommend further research into the effectiveness of songwriting to support people in the early stages of dementia.

## Introduction

This paper documents a songwriting[[1]](#footnote-1) experience that was originally proposed as closure for a music therapy programme that I was leading from 2017 to mid-2019 in a day centre for elderly people living with dementia in Terrassa, Spain. Inspired by the work of Baker and Wigram*,* I decided to use some of the strategies that are described in their seminal (2005) book, *Songwriting*. A further music therapy literature review revealed that songwriting with people in the early stages of dementia has not been widely reported.

I am a music therapist following a Creative Music Therapy approach: I share the belief that each individual possesses a capability for music that can be used for personal development (Nordoff-Robbins UK, 2021). My focus is on the musical experience, whether playing, composing, or listening to music. At the same time, I combine this perspective with ideas from Ansdell’s (2002) model of Community Music Therapy (CoMT). CoMT promotes individual and group participation while reflecting on the environment and its influence on the music therapy process (Barrett, 2020). I also have a background in music education. My dual qualifications help me to think of ways to adapt the process, making it accessible and enjoyable for participants.

When I first approached songwriting, it appeared to require a deep knowledge of music theory, making it unsuitable for some populations. After two years working with elderly people, I recognised that one of the activities that they enjoyed most was singing songs. However, I realised that this particular group had never written a song. This inspired me to explore ways to make songwriting a reality. I decided that crafting a song together might be a good means of closure before I left Spain and my music therapy groups to move to New Zealand.

The objective of this paper is to compare the theory and literature available in songwriting with an actual application of parody songwriting adapted for people in the early stages of dementia. I will discuss two methods and procedures adapted from O’Callaghan (1996) and Baker (2015) before describing the specific steps the group followed to create a song.

## Literature review

Globally, there are 703 million adults aged 65 or over. The estimated proportion of the population aged 60 plus, living with dementia at any given time is 5-8% (United Nations, 2019; World Health Organization, 2020). Dementia is a chronic, progressive neurological condition in which there is deterioration in cognitive function beyond the process of normal ageing (Jones, 2016). Dementia affects each person in a different way, depending on the impact of the disease and the individual’s personality before disease onset. The signs and symptoms linked to dementia can be categorised into three stages: early, middle, and late. The early stage often passes unnoticed, because of the gradual onset of the condition (World Health Organization, 2020). Common symptoms in this early stage may include forgetfulness, losing track of the time, and becoming lost in familiar places (World Health Organization, 2020). Residential care and home based programs are common models when supporting individuals living with dementia.

In recent years, the model of care for people living with dementia has changed as a result of Kitwood’s (1997) person-centred theory. The new model enhances “the wellbeing of the client through quality of care” (Allan, 2012, p.10). Kitwood’s ideas, including a theory of personhood and Model of Needs, have influenced subsequent studies about music therapy for people living with dementia (Allan, 2012). Further evidence suggests that people living with this condition can benefit from music therapy, either at home or in their residential care homes (Allan, 2018; Baker & Stretton-Smith, 2018; Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research, 2021; McDermott et al., 2013; Molyneux et al., 2020).

Scholars have tried to define the function, effects and goals of music therapy for elderly people living with dementia, concluding that music therapy creates environments where those individuals can feel secure and stimulated (Baker & Ballantyne, 2013; Baker & Stretton-Smith, 2018). These environments play a significant role in meeting the social and emotional needs of people with early stage dementia, when it is usual for them to experience a shift from their strengths to deficits (Baker & Stretton-Smith, 2018; McDermott et al., 2013; Molyneux et al., 2020). These studies have revealed that music therapy groups may especially promote feelings of belonging and inclusion among participants who have dementia, and that music interventions could have a positive effect on challenging behaviour and psychological disturbance (Baker & Ballantyne, 2013; Baker & Stretton-Smith, 2018).

The importance of investigating a range of approaches to music therapy for people living with dementia is also highlighted by both small-scale pilot studies (Allan, 2018) and the large-scale, international Homeside study (Cambridge Institute for Music Therapy Research, 2021). Frequent techniques in these particular settings may include listening to preferred music, guessing song titles, playing instruments, and moving to music (Ledger & Baker, 2006). In the group work described in this paper, I focused on one specific music therapy technique, therapeutic songwriting, and its specific application in the closing stages of a group for people in the early stages of dementia.

Therapeutic songwriting has been defined as “the process of creating, notating, and/or recording lyrics and music by the clients and therapist within a therapeutic relationship to address psychosocial, emotional, cognitive and communication needs of the client” (Baker, 2015, p.14). It is therapeutic only if it is directed towards meeting a songwriter’s specific needs. Baker (2015) also highlights that songwriting in music therapy can provide cultural and social connections, a focus on both music and language, and a means of self-expression. Songwriting encourages collaboration within a therapeutic relationship, the creation of artefacts (songs), and has a positive impact on the client and their environment.

Therapeutic songwriting is practised around the world, particularly in English-speaking countries. Baker et al. (2008) found that music therapists in New Zealand and Australia used songwriting an average of once or twice per week. However, songwriting with clients has made only few appearances in the music therapy literature in New Zealand, including a review of techniques (Williamson, 2006) and two case studies (Johnson & Dickson, 2018; Talmage, 2020). I found no studies on this subject in the Spanish music therapy literature, although the Spanish government has published a guide to help organisations that work with people with dementia implementing music therapy programmes (Garcia, 2014). Furthermore, studies on the use of therapeutic songwriting determine that it was employed less frequently within the aged care/dementia populations when compared with other diagnostic groups (Baker et al., 2008). This low endorsement arises again in the literature, with only a few studies published (Baker et al., 2008; Baker & Ballantyne, 2013; Baker & Stretton-Smith, 2017; Clark et al., 2020). Common goals address enabling choice and decision making, enhancing quality of life, allowing life review, and telling the client's story (Baker et al., 2008).

Some authors have tried to standardise the therapeutic songwriting process. O’Callaghan’s (1996) 11-step protocol has been used in palliative care and other settings for many years. This protocol aimed to make the songwriting workflow accessible for people with different cognitive ability. This was the first attempt towards a clinical standardisation of songwriting with clients (Aasgaard & Blichfeldt, 2015). More recently, therapeutic songwriting has been categorised systematically by Baker (2015). Her work is of great value for music therapists interested in using songwriting in their sessions. From the myriad categories found in her book, *song parody* is the songwriting method that I chose for this experience. Song parody emphasises lyric creation, inviting songwriters to rewrite large portions of the lyrics whilst retaining the melody and song structure of the original song (Baker, 2015).

Song parody has been used with older adults with dementia and elderly people with communication difficulties resulting from dementia or another neurological condition (Molyneux et al., 2020; Silber & Hes,1995; Talmage et al., 2020). This is a method that supports participants to create a meaningful group song. Members may use this opportunity to craft lyrics that reflect their own experiences and feelings, offering each person the chance to have a voice and to be heard. Then all the voices join together in the chorus of the song, expressing shared feelings. This is important to enhance the sense of group support and inclusion, and all the flow-on effects of this experience (Baker, 2015). Clinicians may choose this approach when: (1) the pre-existing song expresses an emotion, situation, issue, or story that resonates with the songwriter; (2) the songwriter’s cognitive or communication skills are more suited to song parody, rather than original songs; or (3) the time available to create songs is limited (Baker, 2015).

## Music Therapy Method

### Participants

The participants attended La Llar Fundació,a multi-service centre for elderly people, located in Terrassa, Barcelona, Spain. More than 250 people benefit from the centre’s diverse services, including residential care, a physiotherapy clinic, and day service activities. A multidisciplinary team (MDT), composed of caregivers, social educators, physiotherapist, nurse and music therapist, work together to create, design and apply goals to improve the quality of life of service users. The MDT meets on a monthly basis to discuss directions and procedures to achieve the common goals. Permission has been obtained from the organisation and the group participants to publish all of the information in this article.

A group of 18 music therapy participants at this day centrewere invited to create a song as a closure for a music therapy process that had been ongoing for more than two years.Participants’ ages ranged between 65 and 94 years, and all were assessed with grades 1-3 (early dementia) on the Global Deterioration Scale (GDS) (Reisberg et al., 1982). The GDS is used at La Llar for quick assessments when referring people to a particular group or activity. Three participants had also had a stroke.

This group was selected because the MDT was concerned about some attendees not participating in activities and becoming isolated, with an excessive focus on their disabilities. This is a common occurrence in early stage dementia, when the person is still aware of his progressive loss of functioning (Baker & Ballantyne, 2013). Music therapy sessions were held weekly, for a duration of one hour. The approach and philosophy of music therapy at La Llar follows a community music therapy model. This is a *third wave* of music therapy practice that, combined with community music approaches, allows opportunities for participation, development of personal strengths and other reflective practices (Barrett, 2020). My role as music therapist at the day service was to provide those opportunities to experience and perform music, with the aim of empowering individuals living with disabilities.

### Goals and Objectives

A goal can be defined as the direction followed when designing a method, but also the accomplishment of the change of a problem and its cause that remains over time. An objective instead would be the purpose of an action, it is the step-by-step to achieve the goal (Berger, 2009).

Significant goals for this particular group were to prevent the isolation of some members of the group, to create an environment in which ideas and feelings could be freely expressed, and to prioritise the focus on potential formulated by the MDT and addressed by all the professionals working at the facility. The option of writing a song was proposed as an objective to achieve the main goals for the group. This objective had two dimensions: the step-by-step process of creating an artefact (the song) and a means of closure for the music therapy group. Crafting a song, and being able to finish, sing, and record it, can lead to a sense of achievement (Kirkland & Nesbitt, 2019). I anticipated that this would help focus on the potential of the group, reduce social isolation, and create a setting in which a range of feelings could be expressed.

### Step-by-Step Songwriting Process

Two main protocols were integrated to design this experience: O’Callaghan’s (1996) 11-step songwriting protocol and Baker’s (2015) song parody method. I reviewed, adapted and synthesised elements of the two protocols into six steps for the specific setting at La Llar (Table 1)*.* Both methods shared: (1) an initial song to introduce the process, (2) decision-making about the theme or topic, (3) exploring the topic, (4) writing the lyrics, (5) refining and polishing, and (6) a final performance or recording. These similarities assisted with planning the task.

Table 1

Songwriting Procedures and Objectives

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Step | Task | Procedures | Objectives per session |
| 1 | Motivation | To introduce the song and different versions.  Asking for their participation. | The group will decide whether or not to engage in songwriting. |
| 2 | Theme & Structure | To listen to the recording and to read the lyrics  Group discussion about the new theme and structure. | The group will identify the theme and structure of the original song.  The group will choose a theme and structure for the song parody. |
| 3 | Brainstorming | Directed brainstorming | The group will do a brainstorming exercise to create material for the lyrics. |
| 4 | Writing the lyrics | Use of the material from previous brainstorming to write the lyrics through connections between ideas, words, sentences. | The group will write the lyrics for the song facilitated and directed by the music therapist. |
| 5 | Musical Arrangement | Music therapist helps with the arrangement and final details, i.e. orchestration, fine details in the lyrics (prosodic stress) | The group complete the song lyrics and musical arrangement of the song. |
| 6 | Performance | To perform and video record the song | The group will perform the song and it will be video recorded. |

#### Step 1: Motivation

I introduced the activity and briefly explained the songwriting process to the group. I selected a song beforehand to accelerate the process as time was limited. I chose a song that had been introduced recently in the group’s songbook, to keep the process fresh. The music is a version of the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9 (“Choral”)*, performed in Spanish. It became very popular in the 1980s during the Spanish Transition,[[2]](#footnote-2) as the lyrics and the musical arrangement included messages of peace, union, and camaraderie. The song is called *Himno a la Alegría (Ode to Joy)*. The group listened to different versions and discussed whether or not this was a good song to parody, then agreed that the song was perfect for the experience. An online contest for the best cover version of that specific song provided just the extra motivation the group needed. (However, in the end we did not meet the criteria to participate in the contest, since the organisers were asking for a semi-professional recording of the song.)

#### Step 2: Topic and Structure

The topics and structures of the original version were identified by the group with my help. The group listened to the recording several times whilst reading the lyrics and were asked to identify the main topic. We then counted how many times each particular element was repeated during the song, to gain an understanding of the structure of the song. Once this analysis was complete, new themes for the song parody were decided by the group, concurring in keeping the same *rondo* structure, with a repeated chorus, Section A, and contrasting verses in Sections B, C, and D (Table 2).

Table 2

Comparison of the Original Song and Song Parody

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Comparison | Himno a la Alegría  (Ode to Joy) | Song Parody: *La Canción del Centro de Día* (The Day Centre’s Song) |
| Topics/Themes | Joy and friendship | Happiness, brotherhood, and justice |
| Structure | A-B-A-C-A-D | A-B-A-C-A-D |

#### Step 3: Brainstorming

A directed brainstorming session took place to obtain material in the form of words, ideas and sentences that they could use for lyric creation. The group started by thinking of synonyms for some of the main themes and key words in the original song. This particular approach is very useful for people living with early or mild dementia, as it is very specific and does not require a huge amount of abstract reasoning like other techniques for lyric creation. When there were a good number of words, I suggested creating connections between them in order to form sentences. Complex and deep ideas merged during this step that were included in final lyrics, e.g. “Singing to humanity with affection and friendship”. Figure 1 shows an example of this process.

Figure 1

Example of directed brainstorming during songwriting

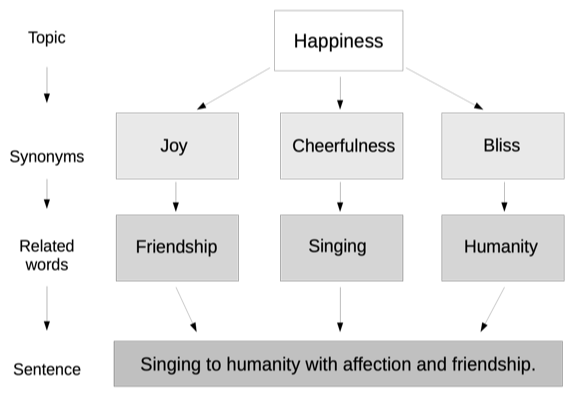


Image description:

Flow chart shows a series of steps in a directed brainstorming framework. These are outlined below and an example is given for each.

* Topic: Happiness
* Synonyms: joy, cheerfulness, bliss
* Related words: friendship, singing, humanity
* Phrase combining these related words: Singing to humanity with affection and friendship

#### Step 4: Writing the Lyrics

Immediately after the brainstorming process, I encouraged the group to start making connections and to form sentences and verses. I used several approaches to facilitate the process: (1) asking questions about relationships between words and phrases from the brainstorm and asking questions about feelings that resonated when reading those words; (2) allowing and encouraging spontaneity; and (3) using the *fill the gap* technique when people felt stuck in the creative process. I maintained the creative flow by asking the clients questions, using familiar language, and commenting on specific words. I noticed that they created connections and links between the lyrics, their environment and local current events, such as the independence of Catalonia from Spain and the waves of immigrants arriving in small boats on the coast of Spain.

#### Step 5: Musical Arrangement

In this session the group worked together to edit their song lyrics. I addressed four elements: rhythm, melody, lyrical structure, and instrumentation. Firstly, I addressed the prosodic stress of words and sentences, correcting the rhythm by adding monosyllabic words or adding *melisma[[3]](#footnote-3)* to the melody. Secondly, minor melodic changes were required to fit the new lyrics to the melody. I proposed options for each specific change and the group decided which they preferred. The lyrics were then reorganised to improve the song structure.

The lyrics were written by the group over two sessions and using mixed techniques, therefore they did not follow any rule of story-telling. The final lyrics resembled a manifesto of ideas that emerged through the brainstorming. Below are the original Spanish lyrics with a parallel English translation. To conclude, the group selected the instruments that would accompany our performance of the song.

## *La Canción del Centro de Día*

*Ven, vamos juntos a escribir la antología  
de todo aquello que nos llena de alegría.*

*Cantando a la humanidad  
con cariño y amistad.  
Desde Terrassa  
reclamamos más justicia.*

*Recogerás, amigo mío, esperanza,  
después de un día duro y largo de labranza.*

*Cantando a la humanidad  
con cariño y amistad.  
Desde Terrassa  
reclamamos más hermandad.*

*Si desde el Nilo hasta el Peñón  
se ahoga gente,  
hoy cantaremos por un futuro diferente.*

*Cantando a la humanidad  
con cariño y amistad.  
Desde Terrassa  
reclamamos más amistad.*

## Day Centre Song

Come, let’s write together the anthology  
of everything that fill us with joy.

Singing to humanity  
with affection and friendship.  
From Terrassa   
we claim more justice

You will collect hope, my friend,  
after harvesting hard all day.

Singing to humanity  
with affection and friendship.  
From Terrassa   
We claim brotherhood.

From the River Nile to the Rock of Gibraltar  
people drown in the sea,  
today we sing for a different future.

Singing to humanity  
with affection and friendship  
From Terrassa   
we claim friendship.

#### Step 6: Performance

The final session was dedicated to practising the song in preparation for a performance and video recording. Musical performance is a key step for either creative and community approaches in music therapy, as the focus shifts from people’s disabilities to possibilities and participants usually receive great support and appreciation from the community (Ansdell, 2002). Recent research also suggests the benefits of video recording as a reminder of success and a tangible legacy of a completed task (Kirkland & Nesbitt, 2019). For this reason the day centre’s social workers kept a copy of the video for future use with the clients.

## Evaluation

My approach to evaluation was inspired by Smith’s (2003) Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This qualitative research approach assumes a connection between what a person says and their thoughts and emotional state. People sometimes struggle to effectively communicate their emotions and feelings, and the researcher has the task of interpreting their words to understand their emotional state. At the same time, IPA allows the researcher to listen to what people living with dementia have to say regarding songwriting and music therapy – filling a notable absence of their voices in the music therapy literature (Baker & Stretton-Smith, 2017).

The participants were interviewed about their feelings and thoughts about this songwriting experience. I prepared the questions and the interview was conducted by another music therapist. The interviews were video recorded, with consent from both individuals and the organisation.

Four participants were interviewed four weeks after the performance. The interviews took place in the main room with the rest of the group present. Before the interviews the group sang their song again to recall it.

The participants were asked about the process: “Could you explain what you did [songwriting]? Can you explain the process you did follow to make it?” Participants responded readily, with nuances in what they each highlighted about the experience. For example, some focused on the collaboration between group members to craft the song, while others emphasised the difficulties and problem solving.

The second part of the interview focused on participants’ feelings during and after the activity. I prepared the questions to encourage the person to speak with minimal prompting from the interviewer (following Smith, 2003): “How did you feel while doing the activity? How do you feel now, after the performance?” I paid special attention to these questions, as the answers would reveal the connection with participant's emotional state. The answers (translated here) revealed excitement, joy, and happiness:

After this I don't feel so old anymore. I put my head to work a little bit, that was good. I feel happy, more useful.   
(Participant J)

We did it with so much love. We were very excited to make the song. (Participant C)

I feel very good and happy singing my own song. We all contributed to make it work. (Participant S)

## Discussion

When completing the evaluation, my main interests were to understand if the experience had been significant for the participants and if the songwriting was an experience the participants would appreciate and remember. My impression was that the group members were very motivated to create the song. They were aware of the collaborative process and, despite some moments of difficulty, succeeded in finishing the song by following the steps with support. I was surprised at how easily they understood the songwriting process, created the lyrics through brainstorming, and then connected their ideas. The level of engagement increased after the completion of each step. Finally, even individuals who had contributed less to the songwriting process also participated in the performance.

I was interested to see how the themes in the song parody connected closely with current events in Catalonia. The movement for regional independence from Spain was so strong that messages of brotherhood and unification were clearly conveyed in the song. For example, the words “peace and justice” are repeated in the chorus. This connection with the environment is present in other recent examples of therapeutic songwriting, such the songs written by the CeleBRation choir during the lockdown in New Zealand in 2020, with lyrics referring to the outside world while people were asked to stay at home (Talmage, 2020). One could infer that these people, even in early stage of dementia or living with a neurological condition, were still aware of external events. Music therapy and songwriting played an important role in their lives, enabling a channel for communication otherwise silenced.

The interview findings and my own experience in the songwriting process have shown therapeutic songwriting to be a powerful music therapy tool for people living with dementia. The participants’ active involvement, excitement and happiness were present during all the steps of the process. The result is a well crafted song parody, full of feelings and emotions that the participants translated into lyrics. They seemed to enjoy the process as well as the product. This project provides evidence that elderly people in the early stages of dementia can still live their lives with dignity, participate in group activities, and craft something new.

As a music therapist, I also learned new skills, especially in how to use songwriting in a different setting. I now feel more confident to continue using songwriting. This experience also opened my imagination to new ideas for creative uses of music therapy techniques.

Finally, this project supports suggestions in the literature that people in early stages of dementia can benefit from music therapy and particularly from songwriting (Clark et al., 2020; Molyneux et al., 2020). The interviews revealed a high level of satisfaction with the results, that can be translated into feelings of achievement and completion, suggesting a focus on strengths rather than obstacles. The participants enjoyed both the process and the outcome (the song). In accordance with Smith’s (2003) IPA, I can interpret these findings as revealing positive outcomes from the group songwriting experience.

## Limitations

Time and resources were limited during this case study, especially for the evaluation. As I was leaving my position at the centre, I had to ask a colleague to record the interviews and send them to me for analysis, rather than interviewing participants myself. Holding the interviews in the presence of other participants might have influenced the interviewees’ responses. This was a small-scale project and a case study, not an experimental design. However, the results add to the growing body of literature demonstrating the impact of music therapy on people living with dementia.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Therapeutic songwriting protocols and methods are an invaluable resource when working with people living with dementia, who may have no musical training or experience. With the music therapist’s support, these participants were able to follow the process and accomplish the task. However, my recommendation when using a protocol is to always to check how it would fit in a particular setting and to adapt the methods to the specific context.

Although therapeutic songwriting techniques and approaches are common and well explained in the music therapy literature (Baker, 2015), I found a an absence of personal experiences from the client's perspective. This is particularly evident in my home country, where music therapy is still developing.

The interviews revealed a positive outcome that suggested a positive impact on individual participants’ wellbeing. I hope this article inspires other colleagues to include songwriting when working with participants who have dementia and other neurodegenerative conditions. I recommend further qualitative research, especially using IPA, to provide more evidence about the outcomes of therapeutic songwriting with people living with early onset or early stage dementia.

Our songwriting journey was exciting, with many positive moments. The benefits of music participation could be seen in participants’ faces and interview responses. Listening to their voices made me realise the importance of our work as music therapists.

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1. Therapeutic songwriting or just songwriting is used in text with the same meaning: the use of the technique of songwriting in a music therapy setting. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Spanish transition to democracy (1975-1982): Spain shifted from its dictatorial regime (after the dictator passed away) to a Parliamentary monarchy system. However, not everybody was pleased with this, some because they would prefer the old regime, others because they saw in the transition an establishment and perpetuation of the same old regime. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Melisma: A group of many notes sung melodically to a single syllable (<https://dictionary.onmusic.org/terms/2130-melisma>) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)