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Idiosyncratic as a New Aesthetic Paradigm in Music Therapy for Children with Special Needs

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Abstract

In music therapy, aesthetic approaches are usually based on universal and normative principles that emphasize musical structure, harmony, and uniform standards of beauty. This paradigm is often insufficient to explain the wide range of auditory responses of children with special needs, especially in children with cerebral palsy and additional disorders, who exhibit very unique body and emotional reactions to sound. The aim of this study is to develop the concept of idiosyncratic as a new aesthetic paradigm in music therapy for children with special needs. In this study, aesthetic meanings are based on bodily experiences, emotions, and personal relationships. This research uses an interpretive qualitative methodology, supported by conceptual-philosophical studies supported by the auditory responses of children with special needs and parental stories. Sound is interpreted as a vibrational and relational experience through phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches used to conduct the analysis. The results of the study show that idiosyncratic responses to both environmental and musical sounds serve as the primary gauges of aesthetic experience and emotional control in children with special needs. In these situations, beauty is determined by the resonance of the body and the emotional meaning that arises from the relationship between the child and the parents rather than formal musical structures. By offering an idiosyncratic aesthetic paradigm, this study contributes to the development of the aesthetic discourse of music therapy. In addition, this study confirms that an experiential, interpersonal, and personalized approach is essential for the therapeutic music treatment of children with special needs.

Keywords: ***Diosyncratic Aesthetics; Music Therapy; Children With Special Needs; Body Experiences; Environmental Sounds***

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INTRODUCTION

To date, normative paradigms are still often used in research on musical aesthetics in music therapy, where musical structures such as harmony, melody, rhythm, and form are considered the primary measures of musical success and beauty. This paradigm originated in the Western aesthetic tradition, which emphasizes the universalism of musical experience and believes that aesthetic value can be measured using formal standards that are stable and generalizable (Hanslick, 1986; Kivy, 1990; Scruton, 1999). These assumptions are reflected in repertoire selection, intervention techniques, and evaluation of therapeutic success, which often focus on the suitability of musical structures and responses that are considered musically "appropriate".

However, this normative method has many limitations when used in children with special needs, especially children with cerebral palsy and additional disorders. According to some research and field practice, the musical responses of children with special needs do not always follow the predictions of formal aesthetic theory. Even without formal musical composition, simple, repetitive, or even environmental sounds often trigger greater emotional, physical, and affective reactions (Thompson, 2012). This phenomenon suggests that there is a difference between the real musical experiences of children with special needs and the aesthetic frameworks used in music therapy. So far, research on music therapy for children with special needs has placed more emphasis on functional aspects such as cognitive development, emotional regulation, and improved motor abilities (Bruscia, 2014; Darrow, 2008). However, a child's aesthetic experience, or how sound is perceived, interpreted, and experienced subjectively, is still rarely the primary focus of research. Aesthetics are not always thought of as the conceptual framework that determines the design, implementation, and meaning of the therapy itself; instead, it is often considered an implicit element or merely a support of the therapeutic process. As a result, unique, individualized, and non-generalizable musical responses are often perceived as anomalies and cannot be used as a legitimate source of aesthetic knowledge.

In some studies in neuroaesthetics and embodied intelligence it has been shown that the aesthetic experience of music is not only auditory; it also has bodily (embodied), affective, and relational aspects (Gallese & Lakoff, 2007; Juslin & Sloboda, 2010). Sound in children with special needs is not only seen as a musical structure; it is experienced as vibrations that affect the body, emotions, and social relationships. Therefore, the musical responses of children with special needs are idiosyncratic and are influenced by their neurological conditions, sensory experiences, emotional memories, and their unique interpersonal relationships.

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This idiosyncratic phenomenon challenges the universal aesthetic paradigm and creates an alternative aesthetic framework for music therapy. Now, aesthetics are no longer considered as pure qualities that exist in musical structures, but as experiences that arise from the constant interaction between sounds, bodies, emotions, and the living context of the subject. This method is in line with a perspective known as the experiential aesthetic perspective, which places aesthetic meaning on the relationship between the subject and the stimulus, rather than on the musical work itself (Dewey, 2005; Small, 1998). The idiosyncratic aesthetic paradigm is proposed as an alternative conceptual framework for music therapy for children with special needs based on this issue. This paradigm argues that the meaning and aesthetic value of music depends on the context, the person, and not universally. Therefore, idiosyncratic aesthetics are not only theoretically interesting, but they also influence the design of interventions, the selection of sound materials, and the assessment of how effective therapeutic music is for children with special needs.

The main question of this study is why a universal aesthetic approach is insufficient to explain the musical experience of children with special needs in music therapy. In what ways can idiosyncratic aesthetics be defined as an aesthetic paradigm that has a scientific and philosophical basis? In addition, how does the paradigm impact the practice of music therapy, particularly in terms of the child's bodily experience, emotional control, and interpersonal interaction?

This research is innovative (new) because it seeks to formulate idiosyncratic aesthetics as a paradigm of musical aesthetics that is centered on individual vibrational, emotional, and relational experiences. By placing the body and emotions of children with special needs as the center of aesthetic meaning, this research helps to expand the aesthetic discourse of music and music therapy towards a more inclusive, contextual, and human framework.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Music Aesthetics: From Normative to Subjective

Formalistic and objectivist approaches that place the value of beauty on the internal structure of musical works dominated the aesthetics of old Western music (Stanford Edu, 2022). While objectivism argues that beauty exists in musical objects and can be judged uniformly by listeners who are adept at listening to music, formalism considers harmony, melody, rhythm, and form as the main components that determine aesthetic qualities. The understanding of the structure and internal relationships of sound is considered the source of aesthetic experience within this framework.

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However, as modern aesthetic concepts have evolved, such normative approaches have come under criticism. Claims of the universality of aesthetic experience ignore the background, body, and feelings of the listener. Musical experiences often use sensory and affective rather than cognitive and analytical. Therefore, formal musical structures cannot comprehensively explain how music is perceived, interpreted, and affects individuals.

Aesthetic thinking evolved into an approach that places the subject's experience as the basis of analysis. According to experiential aesthetics and body aesthetics, beauty arises in the relationship between sound and the listener's body in a given situation. Music is considered to be an event experienced directly through sensations, emotions, and bodily resonances rather than simply a structurally analyzed object. This shift allows for a more contextual and inclusive understanding of aesthetics, especially in the context of music therapy.

Idiosyncratic Ideas in Multidisciplinary Sciences

The concept of idiosyncratic in psychology refers to individual responses shaped by their life experiences and emotional memories. Responses to auditory stimuli are influenced by emotional associations derived from previous experiences, rather than neutrals (Meister, 1991). Certain sounds can elicit feelings of safety or comfort, or vice versa, without the need for certain formal musical qualities. According to this perspective, aesthetic experiences are unique and cannot be generalized. By showing that everyone has different neural connectivity and sensory integration mechanisms, neuroscience reinforces this understanding. Auditory, motor, and affective systems interact in complex ways when processing sound. These systems function uniquely for each person. Non-linear sensory-vibrational pathways are often used by children with special needs, especially children with neurological disorders, to respond to sound. Therefore, conventional auditory perception frameworks are not always sufficient to understand sound experiences.

According to phenomenology, the body is the essence of aesthetic experience. The experience of sound is lived by the living body, not just cognitive consciousness. The direct and pre-reflective aesthetic experience is created by sound as vibrations that touch and move the body. From this point of view, aesthetics cannot be separated from the condition of the subject's body and its existential state. However, in hermeneutics, the meaning of sound is determined by the relationship between the subject and the context. Sound can have a different aesthetic meaning for each person due to the process of meaning that is influenced by one's experience, social relationships, and living circumstances. Meaning is not inherent in the sound itself.

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According to the hermeneutic perspective, idiosyncratic experience can be accepted as a source of aesthetic knowledge.

Music Therapy and Children with Special Needs

Children with special needs, such as children with cerebral palsy, autism, and various limitations disorders, have a wide range of sensory and auditory traits (Silitonga et al., 2023). The way they respond to sounds is affected by differences in sensory integration, motor control, and emotion regulation. In situations like these, music is often experienced as not only an audience stimulus but also as a vibration that has a direct effect on the body and emotions. Conventional therapeutic music methods mostly focus on specific musical structures, the use of standard repertoire, and success assessments that are based on relatively common factors. Although these methods have therapeutic benefits, they have limitations when the child's response does not match normative expectations. Often, standard therapeutic models cannot accommodate unique and unpredictable responses.

These limitations suggest that a more contextual and personalized approach to therapeutic music is needed. This method prioritizes the child's individual response in the design and evaluation of musical interventions. In this perspective, the child's aesthetic experience is seen as an acceptable and therapeutically beneficial expression of subjectivity rather than as a deviation from the norm.

Idiosyncratic Aesthetic Paradigm: A Conceptual Framework

a. *Definition of Idiosyncratic Aesthetics*

In this study, idiosyncratic aesthetics is defined as an aesthetic understanding that is based on the subject's personal, situational, and relational experiences (Hogan, 2015). Its beauty is the experience that arises from the resonance of sound with the individual's body and emotions, rather than as an objective quality inherent in the musical structure. Cognitive processes and formal analysis are preceded by sound as a vibrational medium that acts directly on the sensory and affective systems.

b. *Elements That Shape the Paradigm*

Several key components make up the idiosyncratic aesthetic paradigm. The aesthetic subject is the child's body and emotions, which serve as the primary medium of their sound experience. Environmental sound and musical sound are aesthetic stimuli, which are not

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limited to formal musical categories. The experience and meaning of sound are transmitted by relationships, especially by parents and therapists. Aesthetic meaning comes from the relationship between the child's feelings and life experiences, which makes sound unique and contextual.

c. *Similarities and Differences in Aesthetic Paradigms*

According to the normative aesthetic paradigm, aesthetic experience is understood as a universal phenomenon rooted in musical structure and assessed on an objective standard. On the other hand, the idiosyncratic aesthetic paradigm places personal experience at the center of analysis, views sound as vibrations that resonate with the body, and assesses beauty on a relative and case-by-case basis. This shift marks a major shift in the way special needs children's therapy music is viewed and used.

RESEARCH METHODS

Research Strategy

Interpretive qualitative methods are used in this study to understand and interpret the aesthetic experiences of children with special needs in music therapy. This method was chosen because the main focus of the study is to understand the subject's sound experience rather than quantitatively measuring musical responses. The research is also conceptual-philosophical with a focus on the study of experiential philosophy and aesthetics (Amanda & Albina, 2025). However, reflective empirical data obtained from the practice of therapeutic music in the field reinforce this approach.

This method allows for the integration between theoretical thinking and real-world situations. As a result, the concept of idiosyncratic aesthetics is not only abstractly formulated, but also rooted in empirical phenomena experienced by the child and his environment.

Information Collection and Analysis Techniques

The voice responses of children with special needs during musical therapy activities were observed to obtain research data. Non-verbal responses such as changes in facial expressions, body gestures, spontaneous vocalizations, levels of calmness, and patterns of interaction with sound were the main subjects of observation. These responses were considered to be expressions of aesthetic experiences that occurred pre-reflective and direct. In addition to observation, this study collected narratives of parents' experiences and reflections as the primary data sources to understand the emotional and historical context of children's responses to sound. Parents are

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positioned as important informants because they are well aware of children's habits, preferences, and emotional responses in their daily lives.

Using a hermeneutic approach to data analysis, the meaning of sound experiences is understood as a meaning-laden living text (Silaban et al., 2025). The analysis process is carried out iteratively through a dialogue between empirical data, parental reflection, and aesthetic theoretical frameworks. Thus, the relationship between subject, sound, and context is understood.

Research Objects and Environments

The study subjects were children with special needs with cerebral palsy and various disorders. The choice of subjects depended on sensory and motor features that allow for unique auditory responses. The research aimed to understand aesthetic experiences in a personal context, not for the generalization of results. The focus of the research was on the child's daily environment, which is considered a significant source of sound. Environmental sounds, such as house sounds, family interactions, and everyday objects, are considered important for a child's musical experience. They are also used as a key ingredient in the practice of therapeutic music based on an idiosyncratic approach.

Validity and Ethical Aspects

Triangulation of experiences involving children, parents, and therapists ensures the validity of the data. This allows for a more accurate interpretation of the child's voice response and reduces interpretation bias. To ensure the depth and consistency of the analysis, repeated reflection on the data is also performed.

The principles of empathy, relationship, and respect for the research subjects are the basis of the ethical considerations used in this study. The entire research process is carried out taking into account the comfort and well-being of the child as well as the active participation and consent of the parents. Children are not the subjects of the research; rather, they are positioned as subjects of experience who have rights and dignity.

RESULT

Idiosyncratic Reactions as Aesthetic Phenomena

The musical responses of children with special needs in this study showed that aesthetic experiences are not always articulated through musical actions or verbal language. Instead, they

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are more often communicated through non-verbal expressions such as changes in facial expressions, body gestures, breathing patterns, spontaneous vocalizations, and changes in levels of calmness and attention. Because they do not meet formal standards such as rhythmic structure, tonal accuracy, or consistency of responses, these expressions are often not considered aesthetic indicators in the context of normative aesthetics. However, non-verbal responses are at the core of meaning if aesthetics are defined as aesthetic experiences. According to Dewey, aesthetics are experiential qualities that bring together sensations, emotions, and meaning in a single unit of life, not features of goods (Dewey, 2005). This unity is seen in the body of a child with special needs, not in the structural analysis of sound. Therefore, idiosyncratic responses are a type of aesthetic in itself, not an anomaly.

In these situations, sound helps control emotions. Although structurally simple or even non-musical, certain sounds can lower agitation levels, increase a sense of security, or provide positive effects. The fact that children can show very different responses to the same sounds suggests that aesthetic experiences are situational and individual. These results support the idea that therapeutic music aesthetics cannot be based on the belief that musical experiences are universal.

Vibrasional Aesthetics and Idiosyncratic Aesthetics

The body serves as the primary medium for aesthetic experience, as indicated by the child's response. Sound is perceived not only through the auditory system, but also as vibrations that affect the sensory and affective systems simultaneously. The aesthetic focus of this perspective shifts from the structure of sound to its vibrational qualities. The beauty within the framework of vibrational aesthetics does not lie in the formal relationship between tones; rather, it lies in the ability of sound to create resonance between the internal conditions of the body and external vibrations. Sound vibrations in children with special needs, especially those with motor impairments and sensory integration, are often more significant than complex musical patterns. This is in line with the results of research in the field of neuroscience that suggests that stimulation based on specific rhythms and frequencies can affect the control of the autonomic nervous system.

Because both place the body at the core of aesthetic experience, idiosyncratic aesthetics and vibrational aesthetics are closely related to each other. However, idiosyncratic aesthetics add an individual and contextual aspect: something soothing for one child may not have the same effect as something soothing for another. Therefore, vibrational aesthetics are seen as

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experiences mediated by the subject's bodily conditions, emotions, and previous experiences rather than universal principles.

The Duties of Parents as Aesthetic Liaison

This study found that a child's aesthetic experience occurs in a network of relationships that involve the parent as the main figure, rather than in a free space. Based on the daily experiences, routines, and emotional interactions that have been built, parents have implicit knowledge of the child's response to certain sounds. Although this knowledge cannot always be explained scientifically, it is essential for a child's musical experience. Parents serve as aesthetic mediators who bridge sound and meaning in the idiosyncratic aesthetic paradigm. They help select, introduce, and interpret sounds based on the child's emotional associations. Thus, aesthetic meaning comes from the relationship between sound, the child's body, and his or her emotional experiences with the parent.

Aesthetics is placed in the intersubjective and relational domains of this work. In the musical approach of family-centered therapy, parental involvement enriches the therapeutic process while avoiding technocratic approaches. Thus, the concept of idiosyncratic aesthetics extends from personal experiences to experiences spoken of by others.

Implications for the Use of Music in Therapy

The findings of this study have direct consequences for the use of therapeutic music for children with special needs. First, the design of therapy should be based on the child's response to sound, not a standardized repertoire or technique. Idiosyncratic aesthetic-based therapeutic music requires a case-by-case approach that recognizes that each child's experience is unique. Second, from a theoretical perspective, this method opposes the concept of uniform therapy. Technical indicators such as rhythmic precision or musical reproduction ability are no longer used to measure the success of therapy; instead, changes occur in the quality of the child's emotional experience and body regulation. Music is seen as a tool to improve skills, rather than as a medium for experiencing significant experiences. Third, this paradigm transformation necessitates a redefinition of the therapist's function. Therapists now function as facilitators of aesthetic experiences that are sensitive to relational dynamics and non-verbal responses. Therefore, music therapy becomes a place where aesthetics, empathy, and the presence of the body are combined as part of therapeutic practice.

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CONCLUSION

According to this study, idiosyncratic can be considered a relevant and contextual aesthetic paradigm in music therapy for children with special needs. It is more than just a characteristic of individual responses. The results suggest that normative aesthetic paradigms that focus on musical structure, harmony, and formal forms cannot well explain the aesthetic experiences of children with special needs. Instead, body, emotional, and relational and personal responses of a situational and personal nature shape these experiences.

According to this study, the beauty of therapeutic music for children with special needs lies in the resonance between sound, body, and emotion rather than the perfection or complexity of musical structures. Sound is considered to be vibrations that affect the nervous system and emotional regulation, so its aesthetic value is embodied and affective. Therefore, idiosyncratic aesthetics take our understanding of musical aesthetics from the cognitive and formal realms to the realms of physical and emotional experience. This paradigm also affirms that a relational approach is essential in music therapy. According to idiosyncratic aesthetics, the interaction between the child, the sound, and the parent or therapist creates the meaning and beauty of therapeutic music.

RECOMENDATION

This study concludes that musical therapy observation and evaluation instruments should be created based on the child's idiosyncratic responses. Non-verbal expressions, affective changes, and bodily reactions should be accepted as key data of aesthetic experiences, not as ancillary outcomes. It is critical for therapeutic music practices to involve parents as co-creators in children's musical experiences. Parents not only help the child, but also aesthetic mediators who know what sound means to their child. It is hoped that this method can improve the relevance and sustainability of music therapy as an intervention in the daily lives of children with special needs. In addition, further research should be conducted cross-disciplinally, especially by combining neuroaesthetics, developmental psychology, and therapeutic ethnomusicology. To improve our understanding of the relationship between contextual and cultural aesthetic experiences, nervous system control, and sound vibration, this interdisciplinary approach is essential.

SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS

Theoretically, this research introduces an idiosyncratic aesthetic paradigm as an

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alternative that challenges the assumption of the universality of aesthetic experience. This paradigm expands the aesthetic realm from the analysis of musical structures to the meaning of the body, emotions, and interpersonal relationships. Thus, this research contributes to the enrichment of contemporary musical aesthetic discourse. In practical terms, this research offers an alternative model to therapeutic music for children with special needs that focuses on meaningful experiences rather than musical technical achievements. This model provides a conceptual basis for therapists to create interventions that are more adaptive and specific to each child's unique needs.

Methodologically, this research provides academic legitimacy for the use of narrative data, parental reflection, and physical experience as a source of scientific knowledge in music therapy and aesthetics. Thus, this research encourages the expansion of qualitative methodological frameworks in the study of art and therapy, while opening up space for a more humanistic and contextual approach.

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