

## Turn it off...

Philippe Bouteloup  
Musician, Director of Musique & Santé, Paris  
www.musique-sante.org

*Everyone knows, the child knows and knows that the other ones know,  
adults know and know that the child knows,  
and yet nothing is said...  
Ginette Rimbault*

Yaba, four years old, is hospitalised in haematology, in the sterile sector. When I open her bedroom's door to offer her a moment of music, her eyes are riveted on the television, but, strangely enough, I cannot hear its sound. She nods her agreement. I put a gown on and get quietly closer to her bed. Accompanied by my guitar I sing "La Maman des poissons" (*The Fishes' Mom*)  
*"If one can't see fishes crying  
Who are in deep waters  
It is because their Mom never scolds them  
When they are naughty..."*

Why this song? Yaba's sad face and a strangely tensed atmosphere make me feel like bringing a bit of light heartedness in this room. Something happy. Even though it is not easy to smile behind a protection mask... But, beyond the facial expression, music can give a feeling of happiness through the way we sing a song or play an instrumental piece. However, after this song, Yaba nods to me again to signify that it's over. I am frustrated, I would have liked to go on, but the child decides.

A carer will tell me later on that Yaba's family hasn't come to visit her for a few days. Are her parents running away? Abandoning her when faced with the fatal outcome of the disease? These news knock me out.

In the song, the fishes' Mom "*remains silent*". I suddenly see Bobby Lapointe's text in a different light!

Whereas a child needs to feel the support of its parents in these difficult moments, that silence can only be experienced as an abandonment from the parents. Some parents flee this too big pain caused by the disease and it is, for the patient, an extra burden. The child, who knows it is touched by a deadly disease, don't feel deprived of life, but of 'the things of life'. To be silent is to kill life.

### Hospital Silence

Roland is a premature child, intubated and ventilated; after the hygiene and comfort care, the musician comes closer to the incubator with her violin and strike up a lullaby. The two carers who are around hum the lyrics of the well-known tune. But the child tosses restlessly, arches his back, pushes on his legs.

The good intentions, the desire to calm the child, to reassure him cannot prevent him from showing his discomfort, his anger. When the music stops, Roland calm down very quickly. He needs to refocus, to defend himself from these external stimuli which demand too much energy of him. While the musician thought she was calming the child down, she measures then her powerlessness.

Turning it off

Alexandre is five years old. I see him in the unit hallway with his parents and offer them to join me in the playroom for the music workshop. When he enters the room, Alexandre immediately talks to me about Led Zeppelin. His parents smile at my astonishment. How can such a young child know this mythical band of the 70s? To look “hip” I play the introduction of “Stairway to Heaven” on my guitar, remains from my teenage years when I dreamt of playing like Jimmy Page. Alexandre’s parents let me know through their eyes that I am doing rather well...

Alexandre’s language level is extremely elaborated for his age and he comments continually what’s happening around him. Sitting on the carpet, we play and discover the instruments I have brought with me. And Alexandre goes on commenting.

When I make a shush sign with my index so we can concentrate on the music, he looks at me, staggered, and turns his head away.

Total silence, no more words come out of him. He is apparently upset by my request. He hasn’t accepted that I turned the sound off to report my attention of the instruments’ sound. Have I been too demanding or have I overestimated his capacity to play? The result is here: no more participation from him.

Is silence, in this case, a sign of empty, immobile or sleeping space? Is music, in contrast, a space that is full, inhabited, alive and in movement? “Nothing is fuller of emotional associations than music, nothing is more likely to recreate situations engaging one’s entire sensitivity”.<sup>1</sup>

At other times silence may be a sign of complicity. It is not at all harrowing; just like in a musical improvisation when, on a given sign, everyone has to stop at the same time. Suspended time and emotional tuning bring together the different actors of this moment of music “for real”.

Today, music is an authorised noise in the hospital. But it must remain optional. It is for the child to decide, to tell us whether or not he/she wants that “noise that thinks”, as Victor Hugo puts it. It is often a hardship for the musician who arrives in a ward, full of certainties on the benefits of his/her presence by the kids, to see his/her musical offer being turned down. But not hearing this would be a mistake.

Magic music?

After luring the rats away from the town, the Pied Piper of Hamelin abducts the children because the villagers won’t pay their modest debt to the musician. Devil or magician? Recruiting officer for a crusade or a campaign? Bewitchment, personification of death or of fate? Rats, carriers of the black plague in the Middle Ages, can be associated here with the disease. Unlike the piper, the musician working in healthcare settings must accept that he/she is not almighty: music doesn’t cure, it only helps to live.

Doctors say that their knowledge, as relative as it might be, obviously offers them a protection: a protection to keep on thinking; a protection against the double narcissistic wound that the incurable disease of the child and the inevitable pain of the parents constitute. The musician releases emotions in the child and its parents, but also in the healthcare staff. He/she is thus exposed to the spurt of these emotions. Being him/herself subject to his/her own emotions, his/her intervention is often a delicate balancing exercise.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Rouget, *La Musique et la transe*, Gallimard 1990, p. 236.

### Defeating silence

Sometimes, noise in a hospital is a way of not thinking, of being active to fight against shock, of not hearing the silence that surrounds the disease. "Silence is loaded with intentions when the awaited word is mute; it is synonymous of secret if a fact remains in the shadow, away from the investigations".<sup>2</sup>

According to Ginette Raimbault, psychoanalyst, in palliative care units, "the only help you can bring to a child who is going to die is to show him/her that our desire is to be with him/her until the end".

We could think that associating this musical moment, which is often linked to the notion of pleasure, with this near-death situation is paradoxical, even indecent. On the contrary, it is the affirmation that this presence and attention is essential for one to feel a "living soul" until the end.

Try as one might to look for the right distance, it happens that one is overwhelmed. It is certainly the price to pay in order not to become insensitive and to remain human".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Le Breton, *Du Silence*, Métailié, 1997, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Marie de Hennezel, *La Mort intime, Ceux qui vont mourir nous apprennent à vivre*, Pocket, Robert Laffont, 1996, p. 106.