

# Sounds Soothing

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Harnessing the power of music to meet specific therapeutic needs has created a novel breed of composer.



*In sweet music is such art,  
Killing care and grief of heart  
Fall asleep, or hearing die.*

— William Shakespeare

**W**hy do we instinctively turn to a favorite piece of music to help us unwind at the end of a difficult day? Because, say therapists, music is nature's tranquilizer.

Though musical perception itself remains imperfectly understood, the beneficial effects of certain rhythms and melodies are too obvious to be disputed. But what kind of music works best to help us relax? Until recently, this has been a debate with adherents in several camps, including soft classical music; music concocted of chirping crickets, babbling brooks, and other sounds found in the wild; or just any music that suits the listener's taste.

Now a number of contemporary composers are standing the concept of therapeutic music on its ear. Matching considerable creative skills with laboratory studies, they're composing music scientifically designed to relieve stress, reduce mental fatigue, and encourage relaxation. Far from languishing on the back pages of health magazines, their compositions are selling to an increasingly mainstream audience. The result may be a new direction for entertainment as well as medicine: designer music.

The play of music on the human spirit is an old, old story. King David resorted to his harp to cure Saul of "evil spirits." Sirens lured unwary Greek sailors to their doom with the sweetness of their singing. Both the Greek Orpheus and the Scandinavian Odin could move inanimate objects with the beauty of their music.

Pythagoras, the sixth-century-B.C. philosopher and mathematician, is often credited with founding the practice of music therapy, though he was most likely building on a still more ancient tradition. The contemporary discipline has its roots in Veterans Administration hospitals during the 1940s, when volunteer musicians performed for wounded

BY LYNN CARROLL