

MUSIC AND MASSAGE

Music is to massage what aroma is to a bakery: It may not be the primary draw, but it certainly does add to the enjoyment of the experience. And it can linger around in the subconscious for days or weeks afterward. However, the wrong choice of music can ruin an otherwise good massage experience, experts say.

“If I were a therapist, I’d never use music on a client until I’ve listened to it from end to end, sat in a chair with my eyes closed, and meditated with it, so I’d really have a feel for what my client will experience,” advises Jim Moeller, owner and founder of Serenity, a company in Maria Stein, Ohio, that specializes in music for the healing arts.

The genre known as ambient music has mushroomed in recent years, and massage therapists have hundreds of new titles to choose from. With a market so vast, how do you choose? Is there a right sound for massage? Is there a wrong sound? Here are some factors to consider.

1. BEWARE OF THE 30-SECOND CLIP AND IMPULSE BUYING

Massage therapists often complain they have loads of CDs, none of which they can use, says John Gelb, president of At Peace Media in Riverside, Connecticut. “It all boils down to the fact that they didn’t buy it very carefully,” he says. “When you’re buying a 60-minute CD, if you only listen to one or two 30-second clips, you have no idea what the rest of the CD will sound like. The stores sell it cheap, and while you may think that 30 seconds is kind of pretty, it may be repeated ad nauseum.”

Rather than buying cheap CDs at discount stores, consider listening to music online at your leisure, and then buying something only when you’re satisfied the quality of the entire recording is up to par.

2. TREAD CAREFULLY WITH NATURE SOUNDS

“Nature sounds can be very disruptive,” warns Sharon Myrah of Twin Flames Productions in Fort Collins, Colorado. She is a certified healing touch practitioner and her husband, Steve Skudler, is a musician. “We love wind,” she says. “Wind to us is a positive thing, but how does it sound in the music? Does it sound like it’s picking you up and taking you to see with a bird’s-eye view? Or does it sound like you’ve got a nor’easter coming and you better batten down the hatches?”



Rus Withers, managing director of Global Journey Music USA of Denver, says, the noise of a thunderstorm is not a sound he would play in a spa. “But believe it or not, it’s one of our top sellers. So is a babbling brook.”

3. CONSIDER THE CLIENT

The client’s needs really should determine the music selection. And that’s not always something slow and soothing. If a client has to return to work after the massage, maybe more stimulating music is what’s called for.

“As long as playing something you like doesn’t contradict what the client may need, it’s perfectly OK,” says David Lauterstein, director of the Lauterstein Conway Massage School in Austin, Texas, and a guitarist whose latest CD, *Roots and Branches*, is geared specifically to the needs of massage therapy.

“As a therapist, if you love the music, your body relaxes,” Myrah says. It isn’t always true though, that clients will share the therapist’s taste.

Gelb says. “As a client, the last thing I want to do is criticize the massage therapist at the end of the session. I just won’t make another appointment.” If you’re not getting as much repeat business as you’d like, consider the impact your music may be having.

“Sometimes music, in combination with massage, can bring out strange emotions with no warning,” Gelb says. “It’s happened to me once. For no reason, I got really sad while getting a massage, and it was the music. It’s something for a therapist to be on the lookout for, and if you see a client getting upset, ask if they’d like a change in the music.” If a client requests a certain artist, be amenable and try to honor the request.

4. HONOR THE MUSICIANS’ RIGHTS

Access to music is very open these days, but just because you possess music—on a CD, iPod, or elsewhere—doesn’t automatically mean that you can play it as part of your business transaction. Licensing laws, written to protect the creative products of the composers and performers, may dictate that you need to pay a licensing fee to transmit music as part of your business. Most independent practitioners, because of their small practices and their use of music in one-on-one sessions, are unaffected by music licensing laws.

Many music labels that create music specifically with massage and bodywork practitioners in mind encourage the use of their music, without additional licensing fees. If the rights to the music you’re using are held by one of the performing rights societies (ASCAP, BMI, SESAC), you may be subject to fees, based on their fee structures. If you’re unsure of the rules governing your music, “Ask the labels you use for a letter/e-mail giving you permission to play their music, cost free, in your business,” Moeller suggests.

5. CLASSICAL MUSIC: YES OR NO?

Experts are divided on whether classical music is appropriate background music for massage. Some love it because it has depth and sophistication. Some hate it for the same reasons.

“I always pay attention when I listen to classical music,” Gelb says. “It makes me do exactly what I’m trying to stop doing when I’m getting a massage. I’m trying to clear my mind, just enjoy the benefits of the massage session. Most classical music ... is unsettling to me because I’m constantly paying attention to it, and I don’t feel nearly as relaxed at the end of the session.”

But anyone who’s ever dozed off at the symphony might take a different tack. “I think many therapists are discontent with music that is just acoustical wallpaper with dolphin squeaks and water noises. I’d like to plug classical,” Lauterstein says. “The very depth of that music can add something.”

If you do choose to go to with classical, look for chamber music, which has fewer instruments playing at once. Strings are good, Withers says. So are flutes.

“The challenge with classical music is that it often has loud bombastic sections in the middle that elicit a great deal of passion,” says Dudley Evenson, who, with her husband, Dean, runs Soundings of the Planet, a studio in Bellingham, Washington, that specializes in music to promote peace and wellness. “The music can be wonderful and enjoyable but it tends to not be supportive of massage. If the classical music includes carefully chosen composers or slower sections of symphonies, that can work. Solo piano or synthesizer can work well for some classical pieces.”

6. BE WARY OF MUSIC WITH RELIGIOUS OVERTONES

It’s difficult for a therapist to know how religious music might impact a client—for good or bad. “Some people are freaked out by Gregorian chants,” Lauterstein warns. “It might be a good idea, in the initial interview, to ask what kinds of music they like, and if they have any particular beliefs that would lead you to play certain music or avoid certain music. For example, if you put on some Buddhist chant, some fundamentalist Christians might take that as offensive.”

“Religious music tends to engage the mind and the emotions,” Evenson says. “Religious music that is mostly chanting ... or in other languages can be appropriate, but again, it will depend on the individual client’s personal preferences.”

7. MATCH RECORDING LENGTH AND SESSION TIME

The music should be at least as long as the massage session to avoid switching CDs, skipping through tracks, or hearing a recording start from the beginning again. Of course it’s a nice touch if there’s remaining harmony to accompany the client as he or she regroups after the session.

8. AVOID LYRICS AND SING-ALONGS

As a rule, avoid vocal music, say the experts, for the same reason that some would avoid classical music: lyrics engage the mind.

“In general, most attempts to bring lyrics in to music for massage have not been very successful,” Lauterstein says. “It tends to engage the left side of the brain when you use language, and that’s not what you want to promote in massage.” The exception, Lauterstein says, are lyrics in a foreign tongue.

“It can work well if your left brain is hearing it simply as sounds rather than interpreting it as words.” Avoid music in a language the client is learning.

9. REMEMBER THAT MUSIC, IN AND OF ITSELF, CAN BE HEALING

Music opens the doors to healing, Moeller says. “Therapists work on a person so healing can take place,” he says. “The massage is opening doors to healing. And other tools can help: aromatherapy is one tool a therapist might use. Another tool is music.”

And the benefits of good music can extend far beyond the length of the actual massage session. “We’re developing music for healthy living,” says Myrah, “with the suggestion that therapists present their clients with the idea that they use the music in between sessions. You rely on cellular memory. When you’re stressed, you lie down, listen to this music, and let your body remember the massage. The feedback we’ve had has been incredible.”

10. CONSIDER CD SALES AS PART OF YOUR REVENUE STREAM

“If you’re playing the music, you should also be selling it,” Moeller says. “Shame on you if you introduce a client to some music and then make them do the work to find it to purchase it themselves.”

Withers’ company offers 10-CD packs for therapists to keep in their studio to let clients select from. He says massage therapists are missing out if they don’t get any revenue from the music they play. “You let the client select whatever genre they like, and when they leave, they can purchase the music out front,” he says. “Just selling a few CDs a day can make a big difference in your revenue stream.” **m&b**

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