

Report of May 2014 Meeting
Royal Society
Southern Highlands Branch

Speaker: Doctor Christian Heim
B.Med(Hons), B.Mus, MMus, PhD(Syd), FRANZCP

Topic: Baroque & the Brain Wave: can music help in dementia care?

Doctor Christian Heim walked into the auditorium of Chevalier College Performing Arts Centre to be greeted by a large audience of 115 people. He is currently a psychiatrist in private practice in Brisbane. Previously as a lecturer in Music, he held positions at both the University of Wollongong and the University of Newcastle. He has studied music composition with Peter Sculthorpe and also in Vienna, Paris and New York.

This lecture specifically focused on Dr Heim's recently published studies exploring how Baroque music may be beneficial to the care of people suffering from dementia. What he has done is to take this music from the late 17th century through to the mid 18th century and explore its therapeutic use in dementia patients with the aim of producing more calming brainwaves. As he spoke of the characteristics of Baroque music which made it particularly suitable for these studies, he sat at the grand piano on stage, and clearly demonstrated these desirable musical features in a beautiful recital.

He played the music of Beethoven, Mahler and even Elton John to describe how these composers were able to move listener emotions, and to do that, how they moved the listener from one emotion to another. These types of music have the listener anticipating resolutions so that tension buildup and tension relief alternate. In contrast, as he played a lovely selection of Baroque music, he was vividly able to demonstrate that a composition such as Bach's *Sheep may Safely Graze* strives to keep the listener in one state of mood, one state of the soul, and to keep the listener there for as long as it could.

Dr Heim emphasized that there was a difference between what his experiments did, and what music therapy is. Music therapy is a highly developed form of therapy, which uses one therapist and one patient, normally for an hour or more at a time. What he had introduced in his research studies was the modification of the whole environment for everybody there. It was not music therapy as such.

In describing his research work at a nursing home in Newcastle, Dr Heim told of his observations of patients with long-standing progressive dementia as their environment was modified by the introduction of carefully chosen music. He found that a number of the residents showed marked changes in their agitation level, their wandering behaviour, and their focusing on tasks. They had less distraction, less agitation and often less

verbalization so that verbal abuse towards staff and other patients was reduced. That particular nursing home has found it worthwhile to introduce a Baroque music regime as part of their everyday routine.

It happened that on the evening of the lecture, there was a full moon brilliant in the Southern Highland sky. Dr Heim said that many practitioners in psychiatry believe that a full moon can have an effect on a person's behavior, as demonstrated by the attendances at hospitals at these times. From a factual point of view, of all studies done on the full moon effect, 75% of studies found there was no such effect, while 25% found that it existed.

He compared findings such as these with his own findings on the effect of Baroque music on dementia patients, where there are so many variables, and much subjectivity. His conclusions are that Baroque music has a definite role to play in the care of dementia patients, even though the process by which it works might never be known.

Anne Wood