

Music and Consciousness  
A Sampling of Positive Effects

by Catherine J. Johnson

Music cuts through our conceptual selves, straight to the heart of our emotions. It has the capacity to move our souls or aid us in recovery; to enliven us, calm us, make us silly, sad or happy. “The odd thing about music is that we understand and respond to it without having to learn it” (Ackerman 1991).

“Clive,” a man in his forties, was struck with an extreme form of encephalitis (swelling of the brain) and was left with a memory only a few seconds long. He was at the time a classical pianist, musical editor and encyclopaedic musicologist. His tragic amnesia robbed him of every reality except those of recognizing his wife and being able to play the piano. Although he had to be *directed* to play the piano and couldn’t remember having played afterward, during a performance Clive was fully alive again. It was thanks to “automatism” (Sacks 2008) that he was able to rise above his disability, but according to Clive’s wife, nothing about his performances was automatic. They were “...fresh and alive...” and as “vivid and complete as [they were] before his illness.” Neurologist Oliver Sacks considers that Clive’s continued brilliance at playing the piano may be attributed to music itself being fully in the present. The belief that music is a reality only in the present is also held by psychologist Rachel Cooper (2011).

That drumming can affect consciousness is well known. We’ve seen it on documentaries showing ceremonies of tribal cultures, in women’s meditative drumming workshops and during First Nations prayers. We’ve also seen it on the faces of drummers—in rock bands, and playing djembe’s in the parks. According to Professor David Aldridge of the Institute of Music Therapy, University of Witten Herdecke, Germany (2006), the alterations of consciousness induced by repetitive drumming are similar to hypnosis.

The Canadian Association of Music Therapy defines music therapy as “the skilful use of music and musical elements by an accredited music therapist to promote, maintain and restore mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health.” Music therapy can be participatory such as when Alzheimer’s patients are guided in group singing to stimulate social interaction and a sense of fun, or it can be played for therapy patients to bring about change in their lives. One such therapy is Guided Imagery and Music (GIM) where pieces of classical music are chosen by a trained therapist to match the client’s needs. Works of various composers are used according to how they’re structured, how fluid they are, what sort of depth or openness they have, what the sense of containment is like and so on, and when used by a professional, act as co-therapist (Bird 2011).

Noele Bird, GIM therapist and faculty member in the Music Therapy Program at Capilano University, underwent the therapy herself prior to teaching it and said it cut right through her “conceptual self” reaching straight to her emotions. This enabled her to access images and symbols that she felt were far bigger than her alone and she was able to transform an entire

relationship. Noele feels that we are hardwired for music and it can let us tap into buried grief, healing and a sense of the Divine.

Music therapy is used for palliative care patients to “reach beyond words to soothe, restore and refresh” (Sacks 2008), helping them tap into spirituality, ease pain and promote relaxation. And dementia patients have been known to respond to music in thrilling ways.

Music can have inadvertent therapeutic effects as well. An example of “music piercing our hearts” (Sacks 2008) during times of bereavement or depression is intimately expressed by Wendy Lesser in her book *Room for Doubt*: “[The] performance of the Brahms’s Requiem had a powerful effect on me...as the waves of music poured over me—listening with my whole body it seemed, and not just my ears...something warmed and softened in me. I became, for the first time in months, able to feel again” (Sacks 2008).

Perhaps the most mainstream awareness of the astonishing effects music can have on us comes from the 1990 movie “Awakenings,” based on Dr. Sack’s book of the same name. Survivors of an epidemic sleeping sickness shortly after World War I were stricken with parkinsonian symptoms that ran the gamut of frenzied explosive body motions to frozen trance-like states. Sacks began research with these patients in 1966 when some of them had been in the grips of their symptoms more than forty years. Sacks discovered that staff, on numerous occasions, had witnessed frozen patients move and that the strongest trigger for them to do so was music.

Music has shown to have some positive effects on those suffering from schizophrenia. In a one-month trial in Shanghai, both passive listening and active participation was used on a medicated treatment group with residual symptoms. The study showed significantly diminished negative symptoms in patients plus increased ability to converse with others, less social isolation and increased interest in external events (Tang et al 1994). In the 2009 movie, “The Soloist,” a non-medicated, schizophrenic violinist was shown to have retained his ability to play classical music and to be moved by it to such a degree that his delusions and psychoses were temporarily halted. The movie was based on a true story and was hailed as the most realistic film portrayal of schizophrenia to date. I agree that it was indeed realistic, as I have a brother with schizophrenia with which to base my opinion on. Hopefully more research will be undertaken on positive effects of music on mental illness.

Music can be transcendent, uniting strangers, as when Dr. Sacks’ stopped to listen to a young man playing Bach on his violin in New York’s Central Park on the fifth anniversary of 911. Sacks was part of a silent crowd of people who had assembled. Remembering that day he remarked that “Music, uniquely among the arts, is both completely abstract and profoundly emotional. It has no power to represent anything particular or external, but it has a unique power to express inner states or feelings.”

The following are responses from a cross section of personalities when asked, “Is there anything you’d like to tell me about how music affects you?”

**Dianne 45, Pharmacy Technician**

“I like listening to really fast, happy music when I exercise. It makes me want to move and I get into the exercising way easier. It makes me want to do it.”

**Doug 75, Design Consultant**

“Music brings back memories. It really does.”

**Deacon 30, Service Advisor**

“Music is a good escape. It stops millions of thoughts from running through my mind at the end of the day.”

**Carolyn 52, Piano Teacher**

“The most revealing thing I found teaching kids to play the piano is that without fail, if they didn’t like the piece, they couldn’t play it well. I was glad when I caught onto that.”

**Victor 56, Real Estate Developer**

“Everything aligns better when I listen to music. There’s a harmony with life. I’m not always entirely in the physical state [while listening].”

**Blake 22, Car Lot Supervisor**

“I don’t really listen to music. I’m not typical of my age bracket. I don’t like how the world is changing; I wish it was the way it used to be. I escape into cycling or the gym, not music.”

**Bruce 46, House Designer**

“Rap music makes me want to kill someone. Probably the guy singing it. Seriously, I think it elicits anger because it’s promoting a violent gang culture. Well, I guess Christian rap doesn’t.”

**Connor 17, Student**

“I think it affects your adrenaline and changes your mental state. For example, hard core techno can cause you to behave in a manner you wouldn’t normally behave in. Music enables me to imagine different scenarios in my mind and it influences my mood.”

**Jamie 32, Heavy metal vocalist / Bicycle shop owner**

“I listen to punk-metal. It’s a medium for leftist political statements and it critiques society. It entertains but also unites people who share similar ideals. But when I perform it’s a cathartic release—purging demons you might say. It’s escapist fantasy.”

### **Craig 64, Artist and Poet**

“I think music affects us on a primal level. A song, melody or rhythm can induce a feeling of well-being, like when I play my djembe—it satisfies something innate. I can’t think of any culture that doesn’t have a form of music.”

### **Ruth 56, Artist**

“I like uplifting music, like jazz, swing, Big Band. Something that makes me feel like dancing. I only listen to music that makes me feel good.”

### **Fred 58, Plumber**

“I’ll put on light classical or sitar music and put it on repeat whenever I do bookwork or chores. It helps me do one thing at a time, because normally I’d be all over the place. It’s like a brain spa. I can feel my brain slow down.”

### **Graham 21, Tool Rental Agent**

“When I’m working, music gets me dancing around. My buddy and I make up our own lyrics. You know, we get silly. I love playing the drums too. I get right into it.”

Other effects of music on consciousness:

- Movie soundtracks can evoke nearly any mood in viewers; who needs acting?
- Advertising; background music as well as jingles are used to manipulate shoppers.
- Battle marches used historically to fire up warriors.
- Political rallies use music to fire up the crowd.
- Music at sports events—most Canadians recognize the opening tune to an NHL game.
- Cheerleading—get the teams and the crowd hyped.
- Weddings—traditional march and romantic dance tunes.
- Funerals traditionally use sombre music to match bereavement.
- Kindergarten classes, dental offices and dairy barns use classical and other types of music to calm and soothe.
- Fast music in fast-food restaurants—get ‘em eating and get ‘em out.

Listening to music helped get this writer unstuck part way through writing this paper. She decided to try her own research findings. That music affects most people in concrete ways seems to be conclusive. And certain music suits certain situations. My oldest brother informed my youngest brother that he only listens to his Beach Boys CD in the summer. The younger thought the older was odd. But I got it. It’s like my enjoyment of country music when travelling through BC’s ranch land, but never at any other time. It just *goes* with the experience, makes it whole. And CBC Radio recently hosted a daily program devoted to songs that make us feel good and contribute to our well-being.

We don't need to understand language or culture with music—it is universal and we all respond. "Songcatchers" (ethnomusicologists) work toward preserving cultural history by collecting and recording music so that it may provide information for subsequent generations. It seems reasonable to think that music has evolved from good old-fashioned biological needs, from birdsong since the beginning of time, in attempts to attract a mate. I personally extend the term "music" to include not just human-created music and the wonder of birds singing, but of frogs chorusing, wolves howling and coyotes yipping. These natural songs bring me as much joy and peace as Pachelbel's Canon does. And when my heart lifts on hearing certain Celtic music (the same music I feel compelled to play on my violin), I wonder if the memories of the ancestors are at work.

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