

IN NEED OF MUSIC

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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In the preface to his new book titled *Musicophilia*, an engaging collection of tales about music and the brain, the neurologist Oliver Sachs recounts a story from Arthur C. Clarke's novel *Childhood's End*. The Overlords, a highly cerebral species of aliens, have been studying the human race from their spaceship; but they have encountered one puzzle they cannot solve. Why do humans spend so much of their time playing with, listening to, and preoccupied by meaningless tonal patterns—something the humans call music?

Curiosity eventually brings the Overlords down to the Earth's surface, where they attend a concert. The aliens listen politely, congratulate the composer for what they assume is his great ingenuity, and then ascend once again to their spaceship—still completely baffled about what goes on within humans when they make or listen to music. The Overlords themselves, as a species, have no music.

Dr. Sachs imagines the Overlords ruminating further after their return to their spaceship. The Overlords admit that this thing called music is central to human life and meaningful to humans in some way. As far as the Overlords can tell, however, music conveys no concepts and sets forth no propositions. It lacks the kind of images and symbols that constitute language. "It has no power of representation. It has no necessary relation to the world."

Dr. Sachs concedes that there are rare human beings who, like the Overlords, lack the neural capacity to appreciate tones and melodies. Yet for everyone else, he insists, "music has great power, whether or not we seek it out or think of ourselves as particularly 'musical.' This propensity to music shows itself in infancy, is manifest and central in every culture, and probably goes back to the very beginnings of our culture.... It lies so deep in human nature that one must think of it as innate."

From the perspective of the Overlords, however, one can see the paradox that music represents. Dr. Sachs puts it this way: "Uniquely among the arts, music 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."

This is the paradox of music: it is both completely abstract and profoundly emotional. When we look at the abstract part of music and try to identify what music actually is, it's easy to see why the Overlords were perplexed. The eighty-eight notes on a modern piano are arranged in a series of octaves, each of which is divided into twelve equally spaced tones. This innovation, known as equal temperament, was developed in the seventeenth century and came into widespread use only in the late eighteenth century. But, the aliens might ask, why twelve tones in an octave? Why not fourteen or twenty-two? And why should the notes be equally spaced? After all, some tunes and harmonies are not possible in such an inflexible system.

The ancient Greeks spent a lot of time trying to answer these questions. Pythagoras is a key figure in the history of music. He is most famous for his Pythagorean Theorem, which says—as you doubtless recall—that the square of the hypotenuse of a right triangle is equal to the sum of the squares of the two other sides. Pythagoras looked for a way to systematize the notes on a musical instrument. He searched for a proportion in nature that could establish a ratio—a formula—for arranging the sequence of notes. His own proposal proved unsuccessful, but over the centuries people kept trying to find a basis in nature for tuning the music of humanity.

Over a period of about two thousand years, such a basis was discovered. Today we call it the harmonic series. It is based on a universal phenomenon that occurs when a string is caused to vibrate. If you pluck a string, the entire string vibrates in one long motion, sounding what is called the fundamental tone. At the same time, however, the two halves of the string naturally vibrate in their own right, and so do the thirds, the quarters, the fifths, and so on, creating what are known as overtones. Each of these shorter intervals sounds the note, albeit faintly, that an individual string of that length would make. This means that in nature itself, a single note sets up a harmony of its own. Over time, this harmonic series became the basis of the Western tonal system of harmony.

My guess is that this conceptual explanation of overtones would make sense to the Overlords, perhaps even delight them. But it does not account for the other half of the musical paradox: the fact that music is profoundly emotional and has a unique ability to express inner states and feelings.

After dinner this past Monday evening, my daughter Zoe, in a delightful burst of enthusiasm, called my wife Holly and me into a very small room we call our library. Holly and I sat on a small sofa, while Zoe perched on the ottoman in front of us. She took out her iPod and offered each of us one of the ear buds. We sat there together, united by an iPod—the perfect postmodern family, I suppose. For half an hour or more, Zoe played us her favorite tunes. Some of them—to her amazement and dismay—we already knew, while others we heard for the first time.

One song sounded familiar to me, but I had never listened to it attentively. The song came from an album titled *There Is Nothing Left to Lose* by the Foo Fighters, a band formed in the mid-1990s by Dave Grohl, the last and longest-tenured drummer of a short-lived but now legendary band named Nirvana. Foo Fighter, by the way, was a term originally used by US Air Force pilots who patrolled German airspace during World War II to describe strange balls of light they assumed were secret German weapons. The song Zoe played by Dave Grohl's Foo Fighters is a wistfully poignant guitar-driven ballad titled "Learn to Fly." Several lines in the chorus caught my ear and have been running through my mind ever since.

I'm looking to the sky to save me
Looking for a sign of life
Looking for something to help me burn out bright

There is nothing especially inspired about these lyrics, even when sung plaintively and accompanied by cascading chords and a soothing rhythm. Yet this song conveyed exactly what I needed to hear. Last weekend had been difficult here at All Souls. I was looking for something to help us shine out bright, and the Foo Fighters reminded me that the heavens are always a good place to look. “Learn to Fly” gave voice to my longing. It felt comforting, even hopeful.

Not surprisingly, Dave Grohl’s sky-bound lyrics echo a much older song we hear often in this sanctuary. Among the songs collected in the Hebrew Bible is a Psalm that begins: “I will lift up my eyes to the hills—from whence comes my help? My help comes from the one who made heaven and earth.”

In my own experience, there are times in life when music can accomplish what nothing else can. The Pulitzer Prize-winning American poet Elizabeth Bishop felt the same, which is why she describes the longing for music not as a wish or a want, but as a need. In her short, brilliant poem about music, she writes:

I am in need of music that would flow
Over my fretful, feeling fingertips,
Over my bitter-tainted, trembling lips,
With melody, deep, clear, and liquid-slow.
Oh, for the healing swaying, old and low,
Of some song sung to rest the tired dead,
A song to fall like water on my head,
And over quivering limbs, dream flushed to glow!

There is a magic made by melody:
A spell of rest, and quiet breath, and cool
Heart, that sinks through fading colors deep
To the subaqueous stillness of the sea,
And floats forever in a moon-green pool,
Held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep.

When Bishop writes of “the healing swaying, old and low” and of being “held in the arms of rhythm and of sleep,” her words capture more truth than her poem articulates. In his book, Dr. Sachs notes that a primary function of music in all societies is collective and communal: it brings and binds people together. “People sing and dance together in every culture,” he says, “and one can imagine them having done so around the first fires, a hundred thousand years ago. This primal role of music is lost to some extent today, when we have a special class of composers and performers, with the rest of us often reduced to passive listening.” Technology has further diminished the collective role of music, leaving us not only passive but isolated—although Zoe has broadened my view of the communal potential of iPods.

How do we reclaim the shared experience of music in our culture? One way, Dr. Sachs says, is to go to church, where “music is a communal experience, and there seems to be, in some sense, an actual binding or ‘marriage’ of nervous systems... The bonding,” he explains, “is accomplished by rhythm... Rhythm

turns listeners into participants...and synchronizes the brains and minds (and since emotion is always intertwined with music, the 'hearts') of all who participate.”

The reason we sing hymns together during worship is not to give Wally and his superlative choir a well-deserved respite, nor is it to provide interludes between the reading, the prayer, and the sermon. We sing because the music unites us: the melody fills our souls and the rhythm makes us one. Through music, we develop a collective sense of purpose and strength.

Fortunately, our music last Sunday was characteristically resonant and strong—the hymns, as well as the choral pieces, especially the powerful anthem sung by the Community Chorus from the choir loft and the Musica Viva choir from the chancel steps. Singing together, they gave us a feeling of being embraced by the music. Many of us felt distress at the obvious signs of Forrest’s terminal illness, and we needed consolation. Buoyed by his characteristic wit and indomitable spirit, Forrest was nonetheless visibly weakened by the dual insults of cancer and chemotherapy. For the first time in thirty years, he did not walk down the center aisle after the benediction to greet people after the service. It was a poignant moment: hard to acknowledge and even harder to accept.

On Tuesday, I spent some time with Forrest at his apartment. We discussed a wide range of topics, from the day-to-day challenges of his medical condition, to plans for his 30th anniversary and 60th birthday celebrations in September, to our shared aspirations for All Souls during my tenure as minister. I asked his counsel about a couple of matters, and then we said goodbye. I came back to my office here at the Church, and he prepared to head to Washington, DC, where the following day he would receive the Four Freedoms medal.

Later in the day, I sent Forrest an email, which read in part, “Thanks for the chat today and the good advice. It’s hard to imagine a day when I can’t drop by your office or walk down the street to avail myself of your wisdom. I treasure your friendship and your role as my mentor.”

Today, I find myself in need of music—not the kind that comes through ear buds and cuts me off from everyone else. Rather, I am in need of the music we experience here: words that lift up flagging spirits, melodies that soothe broken hearts, and rhythm that binds us together. I am in need of music.