

Book review: *Music and the mind* by Anthony Storr

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BOOK REVIEW

Anthony Storr. *Music and the Mind*. New York: The Free Press, 1992. xii, 212 pp. ISBN 0029316214.

This insightful book probes the role that classical Western art music plays in our lives from all possible angles to try to determine why it affects us so profoundly and is so important in our daily existence. The author looks at the roles biology, psychology and philosophy play in our understanding and perception of music. As a background to this inquiry, he examines the origin of music and the development of Western tuning.

Storr first tries to discover why music is so important to us by attempting to uncover its possible origin; birdsong, babbling of infants, adult speech, tribal long distance communication, or the possible relationship between poetry, song and speech. He is quick to point out that since we have no record of the music of prehistoric and pre-literate peoples, while we do have their art in the form of cave paintings, we tend to believe that music did not play an integral part in their lives, when this cannot be proven to be the case. The implication is that the Western world views itself as the part of the world where music originated, since music was recorded in some shape or form for the majority of its "Western" history, and that we should not neglect the music of other cultures which has not been codified with written notation.

This first chapter concludes that it will never be possible for us to establish the origins of music with any certainty, but that we can establish that it has been a group activity for most of its history. This, however, changed in the eighteenth century. Since then, the listener is no longer always a performer, in other words, the modern concert has made the listener an entity outside the performance of the music. It is the individual's response to music which is the principal theme of this work.

In the second chapter, "Music, Brain and Body," Storr discusses our physiological responses to music and makes the very important point, that our physical states of arousal are quite similar across a wide variety of emotions and we cannot equate certain physical responses with just one emotion. He believes that we crave arousal in our lives from time to time and contrary to Freud, we do not crave to be in a constant state of tranquillity. According to Storr, music creates a general state of arousal within us, rather than arousing particular emotions. This is the reason it is used to accompany various social functions, such as marriages and funerals, so that we will be more moved by them. Music's ability to move us is also the reason that it is used in therapy with children with developmental delays or children and adults with various neurological diseases. This chapter continues with a discussion of the functioning of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. He states that the emotional aspects of music are appreciated in the right hemisphere (when we

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empathize with the music) and the logical aspects of music in the left (when we listen to music in a detached fashion). Thus a critical appreciation of music is a function of both hemispheres.

In chapter four, Storr continues his exploration of music appreciation from a more philosophical perspective. He examines, in particular, the role of expression in music, as musical compositions shifted from strictly vocal to instrumental music. He pits the formalists against the expressionists to conclude that appreciation is obviously a combination of both form and emotional significance and that the two cannot be separated.

In the following chapter Storr explains in great detail why he disagrees with Freud's psychoanalytic view of music as being an escape from reality or regression to infancy. He discusses the ideas of "ecstasy" and "oceanic feeling." He strongly refutes Freud's ideas that the "oceanic" tranquillity and unity we experience after a sexual experience can be equated with music and justify why we listen to it. He does believe that music can create a state of ecstasy, but that this type of excitement is not the same as an oceanic experience.

In chapter six, the author compares encountering music with encountering persons to show the personal aspects music includes, which remove it from the realm of science. Due to the advance in modern technology we can encounter music as a solitary listener and get to know its personal aspects in our own controlled environment.¹ According to Storr, the personal characteristics of a composer are embedded in a piece of music, even when these are restrained by the prevailing style of music and musical atmosphere of the time.

The following two chapters are the most difficult part of this book, as Storr launches into a summary of Schopenhauer's general philosophy to show the importance of music's place in it in relation to the Kantian notion of the Will. Schopenhauer claimed that music is the direct expression of the Will since it mimics the emotional fluctuations which we all experience; in other words, music expresses the innermost spirit of man. Wagner revolutionized his music after he read Schopenhauer as he freed his music from the words as the closest expression of the Freudian "little death" which Wagner anticipated.

Storr makes an interesting and insightful comparison between Schopenhauer and Freud on the one hand and Nietzsche and Jung on the other hand. His thesis is that even though Schopenhauer and Freud gave music different roles in their theories

¹Here I am reminded of the philosophy of the famous Canadian pianist, broadcaster and author Glen Gould.

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of life (Freud was said to have had a complete lack of aesthetic appreciation), they both viewed music as delivering a person from affliction rather than enhancing life. Storr believes this is because both men were atheists, in contrast to Nietzsche and Jung who were both raised in Christian homes, but who left Christianity and struggled to replace it with something else. Nietzsche viewed music as something which could reconcile us with life rather than detach us from it and it was a passion for him throughout his life.

Storr concludes this fascinating work by likening "great music," music which is inspirational, to a type of belief system or almost a religion which orders our human experience, gives us a sense of control over our lives, and makes our living on earth worthwhile.

Overall, I find Storr's writing to be very clear and accurate, but I have a few criticisms. Recent work by the Nobel Prize winner, Gerald A. Edelman, such as *Bright Air, Brilliant Tune* (1992), has dispelled brain theory which focused on the different parts of the brain serving different functions (i.e. right versus left). This makes Storr's discussion of emotions being centred in the right brain and logic in the left brain rather mute. Also firm definition of such philosophically loaded terms as "feeling," "emotions," "empathy," and "appreciation" would have strengthened his arguments. These terms are used by many different researchers and writers in many different contexts making clarity and consistent usage throughout one work very important.

In conclusion, this book makes really interesting reading for musicians, philosophers, musicologists, music therapists and music educators. It brings to each of these disciplines a broader perspective of music and music's relevance to almost all aspects of our lives. It is an important and useful work to all those engaged in music research.

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