

What does music mean to us essay

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What does Music Mean to Us? The Effects of Music in People's Lives
Music has been present in mankind's history since the beginning of times, in virtually all civilizations that ever existed. In the contemporary western world, it is an integral part of society on many levels, whether it is apparent or not. The scope of this paper is to characterize the effects of music in people's lives. In general, people in our western society may not stop and think about this topic because music is taken for granted. In order to begin our appreciation for the role and the importance of music in our lives, we must first embark on a journey through time; this is the "standard procedure" that historians and archeologists use to answer any questions, not only on the past of our society but also on its connection to our present time.

So, how did music start and evolve down to the 21st century? In addition, readers may not relate to a didactic expose from a historical point of view on the topic. Rather, it is necessary to make the readers personally connect to the idea of understanding why music is important, hence, the description of experiential experiences anyone can relate to, prompting the question: what is the general empirical experience that everyone has with music? Since the latter question deals with superficial observations, looking in depth at how a common experience with music involves biological as well as psychological components, allows the readers to delve into a much more rigorous treatment of the topic. In addition, since music is multicultural, we cannot only consider the importance of music solely from a western point of view. Therefore, how has music been considered and shared by different cultures? What effect does music have on the people of the modern world? This last

question serves as an attempt to return the readers to their own realm and time while taking a step back to get the overall picture of how music, in the internet age, is affecting their lives but everyone's life, now. Major theories of human development may shed light on the role of music in History. The first theory is the ecological view, which postulates that people are able to exercise reason and logic when they are faced with similar environmental situations, implying that the human mind is hardwired to think in definite ways. The second theory is cultural relativism, which postulates that the human mind has an array of multiple responses, implying that each society evolves in a distinct, idiosyncratic fashion that depends on the events taking place in a particular cultural as well as historical tradition. (Blood, Music Theory and History Introduction) Based on personal observations[lhd1] and general reading on the subject, both approaches can be reconciled since humans are products of their biological inheritance and are affected by either environmental stimuli or experiences that families or entire cultures may share.

Specifically, civilizations from different continents, throughout their history, have used music in many aspects of life events like funerals, celebration of birth and marriage, and entertainment. That still applies to our contemporary life as well. [lhd2]Primitive musical instruments were found in prehistoric times.

The Ancient Greeks were first recognized in the development of a system for writing music. Multiple pottery artifacts show them playing instruments and dancing. The Roman Empire took their inspiration on what musical style the

Greeks had and made it their own. In other parts of the world, many types of percussion or wind instruments already existed with the Incas, the Chinese, and others. In the Biblical Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelites played music; King David accompanied himself while singing psalms to Yahweh. In the Dark Ages, the combination of liturgy and music became essential for worship, not only in the early Catholic Church but also in the Orthodox Church.

This trend increased throughout the Middle-Ages with chants specific to religious orders, for example, the Gregorian Chants. (Blood, Music History) [lhd3] Meanwhile with secular music, traveling minstrels and troubadours entertained the rich feudal lords with music and sung stories about noble virtues, love and chivalry. The 16th century was the time of the Renaissance when many aspects of the Arts were exquisitely developed. Music was no exception. In fact, music theory and writing became better formulated while music printing benefited from Gutenberg's advances in mass printing. During the French and Italian Renaissance, opera and ballet became established as forms of leisure while music and dancing were common in the entertainment of the Monarchy. In effect, music was used as a "social barrier": music was written by famous composers for the upper classes bourgeois and nobles whereas the common folks had their own music.

Meanwhile in Asia, Chinese opera was well known and had similar dramatic themes than the European operas. Down to the 20th century, music theory evolved while composers became experimentalists who broke the mold of traditional composition and tonality, for example, with dodecaphony. In

In addition, other forms of music became popular like jazz, folk music, pop music, and computer music; silence was even used as a musical tool. (Blood, Music History [Lhd4]) In the entertainment of the late 20th and early 21st century, music became a vital component to the Film industry in which films turned out to be crucial forms of entertainment for the masses. Film scenes can be enhanced not only with sound but also with a music piece that is appropriate to the atmosphere of an entire film or a single scene.

Musical scores are carefully placed over images during the editing process; the instruments, the length of the piece, the mood of the piece, related to how the music is written, the level of sound are thoroughly controlled. Music in cinema is usually story-driven and supports the scripts. However, music can become the main creative process of an artistic feature length, short, and documentary.

Movie scores are varied: instrumental music may be played or a man or a woman or a child may sing with music or a Capella. Generally a music composer needs to be able to write music that translates into visual ideas that reinforce the images and sound of movie scenes in the eyes of the audience, primarily influencing their emotions and feelings. Certain music pieces have become famous with most movie goers and the general population, due to a dramatic or memorable element, which may eventually turn out to be part of an entire generation. " Jaws" (1975) is a famous and classic example of how music is used to provoke fear in the audience of horror/thriller films. The shark music theme composed by John Williams

consisted of 2 simple low alternating notes (F and F sharp) played by a cellist.

Alternating pauses with the 2 low notes, faster tempo, and a crescendo of successions of more low notes give the audience an idea of distance and movement that translate into the impression of a danger coming closer; no one can see it, just like a shark under water. This was simple but effective. (Scheurer, 1) [lhd5] Another example is "2001: A Space Odyssey" by Stanley Kubrick who used the Waltzes by Strauss to play over shots of spinning space stations in orbit around the earth. The Strauss Waltzes were already well-known classics but using them in such an unusual environment (a science-fiction film) produced a memorable experience with the audience. Someone in 2006 may hear the Waltzes and think automatically of Kubrick's film, not necessarily of Vienna and the Danube. Scott Joplin's 1930s ragtime piece in "the Sting" (1973) is a memorable tune as well even if today people have heard it but do not remember who wrote it and where it came from.

In addition, evolving from the 1960's and gaining momentum in 1970's, the concept of music videos was based on the marriage between a song and a video plot. Music videos are common place today, especially among younger generations, from the 1980's onward, highlighting an insatiable appetite for some form of music, even mediocre music determined as such by music theory standards.[lhd6] A well-known French proverb says "La musique adoucit les moeurs" (literally, music softens moods). In English, a similar proverb exists: "Music soothes the savage beast." A common experience with music is that it does have an effect on our moods, a good

effect or a bad effect, depending on the type of music that is played and the mind frame of a person listening to it. In fact, a frequent empirical observation is that people may feel either nostalgic if a piece of music is connected to a cherished memory or they can feel sadness and depression if the memory is of someone who died, for example. On the contrary, people may feel happy and excited when they hear their favorite song on the radio.

These are already clear indications of the power of music over lives.

Interestingly, a person may choose to play a specific style of music based on internal dispositions that were affected by events in the person's life like stress due to work, positive or negative feelings etc... It can be done consciously or unconsciously. Another interesting observation is that generally, if someone is not acquainted with a certain type of music, he or she may not like it at first. This dislike may stay or may turn into the opposite feeling.

When exposed to music from a different culture, a person may be lost as to how to interpret the harmony or the rhythm features of a musical piece, with respect to what he or she is used to listening to in his/her own culture.

Certain musical elements can be familiar to a person's ear or unfamiliar in the musical style from a different culture. Basic musical components are essential to the perception and mental processing of a musical piece. Pitch or a pure tone is the most fundamental component. It is defined as "the perceived fundamental frequency of a sound." (Pitch, 1) Whereas the frequency pertains to the physical property of sound, i. e.

a wave form, the pitch is what the human auditory system perceives. For example, a small change in frequency may not be heard but a change in pitch is an audible change of frequency. Timbre or tone quality or tone color is another component, pertaining to the quality of the sound of a note that allows the distinction between the sounds produced by different sources.

(Timbre, 1) Other terms that people use often are harmony (arrangement of simultaneous pitch layers and melodies), melody (one or more musical motifs), and tempo (pace of the musical piece). Remarkably, music can be described by terms like “ a harsh tone” or a “ warm voice”, implying a general association of music and touch. Interestingly, some people may see colors when they hear particular sounds or music due to a disorder called synesthesia, which is considered a neutral neurological condition. Music can even be used as therapy for elderly people or people with mental disabilities because music will stimulate their senses. Additionally, research has been done to give blind individuals synthetic vision using a soundscape camera device.

(Soundscape, 1) A soundscape is an environment created with music, sounds of nature, of humans, of animals, and sound signals like a bell, for example. In essence, a soundscape reconstitutes an acoustic surrounding environment that may be real or imagined. It makes sense to help blind individuals with music or sound since they are acutely tuned to the auditory sense due to the loss of vision. A camera device able to recognize visual objects and translate them into sounds for a blind person for them to see by hearing is quite extraordinary, thereby prompting questions about the

relationship between biology and music. Routinely, music is used to control our reactions and our moods.

This is a clever idea that makes use of the power of music over minds and senses. Virtually for every advertising spot on the radio or on TV, advertisers make us buy their products by using catchy music tunes. In supermarkets or fast-food restaurants, music is played to influence how much we buy or how fast we eat: these observations are well-known and well-established facts. Instrumental music versions of famous tunes, nicknamed “Musak” (after the well-known company that sold such music) are played in elevators, supermarkets or doctors’ offices, hence the term “elevator music”, which has the negative connotation indicating boredom, even if the music is played to appease our mood while waiting or shopping. In offices of naturopaths or holistic chiropractors, when asked why they play oriental or soundscape music, the answer is that the best benefits of their treatment includes the music or sounds of nature played in conjunction with aromatherapy in order to calm, heal, and soothe patients while they are treated by massage or acupuncture, hence the holistic term. In this particular case, the olfactory, auditory, and tactile senses are stimulated together to achieve a direct positive effect on the state of a person’s body and mind.

[lhd7]Fundamentally, a comprehension of the physiological connection between music stimulating our senses and how the subsequent activity of the brain that affects the body, is essential in order to define why music has such an important place in the lives of people. So, the questions to be posed are: how is biology involved in the perception of sound and music? How is

the biology of sound and music perception related to psychological effects on the mind and/or physical effects on the body? The theory of harmony has been studied using physiological, psychoacoustic, and neurological methods in order to pinpoint the neurological mechanisms responsible for perception of harmony. Based on observations found in ethnomusicology, developmental psychology, and animal behavior, a hypothesis was developed to account for these observations. The theory of harmony is linked to our auditory system through task-specific neurons, which mirror the physiological as well as anatomical characteristics of the auditory system and related cognitive ensemble of perception mechanisms. Essentially, a particular harmony perception relies on peripheral auditory neurons; these exclusively transmit information about recognizable patterns of sequential regularities. In addition, many neurons are tuned within a certain range of frequencies in the audible spectrum. Neuroscience explains the preference of distinct cultures for certain musical styles.

What constitutes the global, typical, recognizable range of music styles corresponds to pre-determined biological limits not only on the range of notes used in music all over the world but also on the combination of these notes. So, for example, a certain combination of notes belongs to Western-born cultures while another combination may belong to Asian-born cultures. However, "foreign" music can be enjoyed by individuals from other cultures if their brain has been exposed to the foreign musical style, which implies a neurological environmental adaptation. This adaptation potential exists in everyone and can be developed to different levels. (Tramo, 92-116)

Fundamentally, the brain contains neurons that specialize in music

perception, comprehension, and imagery. These neurons seem to connect with sensorimotor neurons, controlling the brain's interpretation of rhythmic patterns, coordinating body movement.

(Repp, 409-411) It is then not difficult to understand how music can be relaxing or healing. Going back to the example of the holistic chiropractor's office with soundscape music, aromatherapy, and relaxing massage, the olfactory and tactile senses, are connected to neurons as well, stimulating certain parts of the brain, which couple with other areas that are stimulated by music perception and imagery. The result is an overall sense of wellness that a person feels after such treatments.

The opposite is true when someone lives near a busy road with a high level of noise, which "shocks the brain" (there is no neurological comprehension of the noise), thereby causing unpleasant stress-induced physical responses. In consequence, music causes biological stimulation affecting a person's mental as well as physical responses, emphasizing the biological importance of music in everyone's life. With respect to cognition, what is the nature of the connection between music perception and the cognitive consciousness of music? Fred Lehrdahl is a well-known music theorist from Columbia University.

He has explained the link between what he calls "a compositional system" (music piece) with "cognized result" (resulting cognitive interpretation of the music piece). Lehrdahl proposes the concept of "musical grammars", which are a set of primary rules that can generate "musical events and musical descriptions." These ideas are further divided into 2 categories: "

the compositional grammar and the listening grammar.” The listening grammar generates mental representations of the music in auditors. The compositional grammar is itself divided into 2 more categories: natural and artificial.

The difference between the two types is that the natural one comes into existence spontaneously whereas the artificial one is consciously generated by an individual or groups in a culture. (Lehrdahl, 231-239) As an illustration in our modern Western society, a common observation is the disconnection of older generations with the musical style of younger generations. Based on Lehrdahl’s ideas, this represents a gap between the listening grammar of the older generations and the artificial grammar of the younger generations. The gap can be reduced if the listening grammar of an older generation is modified to “ accept” the artificial grammar of the younger generations. Inversely, the artificial grammar can be modified to approximate the listening grammar of older generations. The importance of music is clear to me at this point: auditors work out a mental musical representation of certain styles of music, which affect their connection to others who may have developed a totally different mental music representation because of their dissimilar musical styles. Globally, music appears to affect lives either by uniting or dividing people according to cultures and time. Tramo et al.

explained in biological terms how cultures differ in their comprehension of musical styles. Environmental exposure to music of a particular culture is also an important component of how a certain culture acquires a musical style, an idea that is further supported by Lehrdahl’s natural and artificial

grammars. Ethnomusicology is an interesting field of study, connecting the study of music in a particular cultural and social context. In essence, it defines how music affects culture and how culture affects music; both ideas are not necessarily equivalent concepts. Anthropologists have participated greatly in this field, studying the dynamical interactions between cultures that determine the evolution of cultural musical styles. A general conclusion is that every culture on our planet has developed a distinct musical style to fit their religious or entertainment traditions. Yet, what are the effects of multicultural contact in the context of music? One concept is cultural appropriation.

This term is often used with a negative connotation. It refers to a minority culture whose essence and identity are “stolen” by the majority culture. This phenomenon includes music. Famous examples in the United States are the white rappers “wannabes” appropriating Black rappers styles and Elvis Presley whose music was heavily influenced by African-American musical traditions in his native south. In other parts of the world, a more subtle example is brass band music called “Trubaci”.

This kind of music is almost exclusively performed by Romani people. However, many people of Serbian origin will regard it to be their own style. In Asia, hip hop music is still a source of friction because some Asian cultures may not approve of people acquiring “Afro-centric norms”, heavily influencing younger generations by masking any interest in their own inherited musical traditions. (Cultural Appropriation, 1) Regardless of how many conflicts there are between cultural musical traditions, an inevitable

blending will occur. That is especially true in our modern world where satellite TV, CDs, DVDs, and internet technology are virtually prevalent everywhere. Music downloads have been the “hottest” feature of the web.

People not only in the U. S. but all over the world, especially kids and teenagers, have turned into heavy consumers of music. An advantage of internet downloads is that anyone can find practically any type of music, even obscure titles or ethnic musical pieces that were not easily available before the internet age. However, a major disadvantage is that the majority of downloads come from what is considered “pop music” whose musical value may be questionable because of a lack of originality and understanding of complex music composition that was common over 100 years ago. Heavy commercial media involvement is responsible for the spread of pop music as being the “coolest” music young people want. Pop music is mostly generated in the U.

S. and U. K.

and promotes English as a major language. So, the accultural musical phenomenon of casual musical contacts of U. S.

forms of music with other musical cultures seems to have turned into a commercial aggressive takeover of other cultures, promoting cultural assimilation. Time will tell whether a regain of a cultural musical autonomy will happen. As a unique form of entertainment and leisure, music is also part of the main stages of life in many cultural traditions and personal lives. It has a profound effect on our bodies and minds. It is even used as a

therapeutic tool for many mental and physical afflictions. The expanding modern world has greatly increased access to an enormous number of musical pieces, through the internet, hopefully enhancing the human experience with music in general. However, quantity does not equal quality. Even though the access to music has increased for everyone, does that mean that people in general appreciate the value of music in their life or what effects music has? I don't think so.

The reason is simple: we live in a consumer society in which people consume. For the most part, they do not know that they consume. Consumerism has taken away any thoughts about why we ought to appreciate something: you like it because everybody else does. Music as it was written over 100 years ago had complexity, "contemporary music is not complex but complicated" according to Lehrdahl. Based on my own observation, people mistake complication with quality and outstanding talent. Any good music composer will agree with this statement.

Cultures in which people live without much consumerism, tend to appreciate what they have, in particular their traditions, including their music, which becomes part of their identity. Works Cited Blood, B. "Music Theory and History." Dolmetsch Online" November 1 2006 (2002): November 13 2006 "Pitch: Music Section.

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[htm](#)>[lhd1]This is my own observation.[lhd2]This is my own knowledge based on multiple readings of books i. e. my personal observations.[lhd3]If you look at the Dolmetsch website, this is a very long section, one section. So I have summarized the main ideas.

[lhd4]Same thing here. There is no other reference for this section. I got everything from there.[lhd5]The following is my own comment.[lhd6]My own comment[lhd7]I asked this question myself, so it is a common knowledge