

## The Musical Mind

Speaking of songs, can you remember when you first started to sing? I can't, but I remember my mother singing throughout my childhood and it's a very happy memory. I have a feeling we are actually born singing. A strange sort of song, you might say, the demanding wail of babies, before the endearing coos come along, but I do think that **singsong sounds** are built in to our biology. Music, like love, cannot be entirely explained because, though we all know its powerful effects, we don't know where they come from. Even so, from the beginning of our lives we will be guided in the use of our minds by something musical as well as by love.

I'm not the only one who thinks this way, of course. Oliver Sacks, in his extensive writing about the mind, says he found music was always 'forcing itself on his attention.' In the book *Musicophilia* he says it must be innate because 'it feels almost like a living thing.' Every philosopher wrote about it – Nietzsche was fascinated by the effects of music on our physiology and now there are hundreds of books about that very subject. *This is Your Brain on Music - The Science of a Human Obsession* by Daniel Levitin is one by a contemporary researcher in this field. I wish I had space to list many others that I have come across. It is only the strict evolutionary biologists who say they don't value music because they can't see any adaptive purpose in it. Its significance is too deep to explain fully, which makes it the same as love.

I think we experience our mind as a **dance** – it flows with every movement we make. Parkinsonian patients whose natural movement is dreadfully 'sticky' can often sweep around the floor when the right music plays. My father-in-law lost his speech entirely through a brain injury, but could sing entire songs when his wife played them on the piano. It's very likely that we humans had music in our lives before we had language and you can still hear it in the way we speak. It is playing in our mind all the time and we can choose to engage with it as much or as little as we like.

Our mind needs connectedness with other people and there is a lot of research to show that singing in a choir or a group produces unparalleled physiological co-regulation. It does this through the vagus nerve of our Autonomic Nervous System. Breathing and heart rhythm are more or less synchronised so that many internal wave patterns tend to match up and we feel a sense of belonging that is stronger than in any other communal activity. I've ordered another book about this – *Imperfect Harmony - Finding Happiness Singing with Others* by Stacy Horn. The main bonding hormone, oxytocin, is released (as it is in lovemaking) and the natural opiates called endorphins are also flowing at this time. Choral singing expresses both music and love.

My writing about love, which owes so much to the work of Humberto Maturana, has a core idea that the bond between mother and baby is the foundation for the way our minds work. Together with the anthropologist, Gerda Verden-Zöllner, Maturana explored the evolution of **humanness**, which consisted of increasing vulnerability, closer intimacy and eventually the sensual mutuality we call love. They wrote a book called *Love and Play - The Forgotten Fundamentals of Humanness* which was only published in German and Spanish. Much later, with Pille Bunnell as Editor, a lot of this material was published in English as *The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love*. Regrettably, most people find this text difficult to read. Its main point is that, without a biological condition known as love, the behaviour that we know as humanness could not occur.

They discuss patriarchy and ‘political existence’ against the background of a supposed ‘matristic’ civilisation thought to have existed tens of thousands of years ago in which women’s bodies, childbirth and child rearing were revered and provided a model for living in the human society. The proliferation across archaeological digs in Europe of so-called ‘Venus figurines’ dating from the stone age forms part of the evidence for this.

They point out that babies are born with the expectation of being loved. The knowing that has been instilled in their minds (and the minds of their mothers and fathers) is that without love they will not survive. Throughout adult life this remains true though it is often buried some way beneath the appropriative, controlling part of our mind. Fortunately it can come to the surface when it’s needed and it is always available for us to draw on as we choose to do so.

The imitative and ‘singsong’ interaction of mothers and babies is also described as the springboard for all our artistic pursuits and our **aesthetic pleasure** as adults. The anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake wrote about this in *Art and Intimacy - How The Arts Began*. She says that the ‘rhythms and modes of infancy’ equip our minds for what she calls ‘mutuality’ – the sharing of emotional states with others. As with love, our instinct for the arts is innate, but that doesn’t mean its development is inevitable. We need to practise to arouse our artistic expression, which includes dancing and story-telling, playing and singing together. Everything we do with our **voice** is in the interests of emotional communication and the maturing of our mind.

I was at a place where there were horses on the weekend and the sounds of tree-clearing in the distance distressed the animals severely until their owner calmed them with her voice. It was dramatic; one moment they were tense and frightened, then, hearing her voice, they relaxed into an obvious calm and trust. What a wondrous instrument of nature and our mind is our distinctive, individual voice?

Anne Karpf wrote a lovely little book called *The Human Voice - The Story of a Remarkable Talent* ‘to challenge the indifference to this instrument’ in our everyday mind-using. She said ‘it lies at the heart of what it is to be human.’ Our mind responds unwittingly to the **sound** of someone’s voice and we make decisions accordingly, more so than on their actual words. You can tell how your friends are feeling, both consciously and subconsciously, from the tone, the pitch, the timbre and the volume of their voices. The intimacy of mother-baby love begins long before the birth because the baby’s mind is shaped as she or he listens from the womb to human voices.

The brand-new book by Col and Pat Jennings called *Willing to Engage* has many references to music and emotional health and a section on *The Role of Music in Healing* in which other interesting books are described. They remind us (with help from Gottfried Mayerhofer) that the spiritual nature of a musical experience ‘cannot be expressed in words because its origin is not comprehended by the created world . . .’ In other words, it comes from the unknown, that large part of our mind that is more important than you think.