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MUSIC

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A MEANINGFUL RESOURCE AT TURNING POINTS AND IN TIMES OF CRISIS

BY Suvi Saarikallio

Why does music prompt such a powerful emotional response? How does music reach our emotions and play on them? Music psychology researcher Suvi Saarikallio discusses the meaning of music for individuals and communities at turning points.

Music is a resource in our lives in many ways. It brings us together, provides us with memorable experiences and gives us inner strength. The power of music is in its ability to plumb our emotions, subtly and profoundly. Many of my interviewees have described how meaningful music has been to them, particularly at difficult times in their lives: a source of solace, conduit for emotions and companion along the way.



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MUSIC SYNCHRONISES US, IMMERSES US IN THE SAME WORLD OF NUANCES AND CREATES THE ILLUSION OF US BEING AS ONE.

As a music psychology scholar, I have long been interested in the ways in which music forms a meaningful part of our lives at its various stages: how music supports the growth of children and adolescents, why music prompts such a powerful emotional response and why people identify music as such an important source of well-being. The coronavirus pandemic forced all of us to contemplate our capacity for coping with crisis. The meaning of music for well-being in everyday life and even for our mental health became an object of keener interest than before.

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Music research has widely explored the ways in which music serves as a source of everyday strength. I am currently leading a research project funded by the Academy of Finland on music as emotional support for adolescents. Young people are adept at seeking out both reinforcement for good feelings and help for bad feelings in music. Some listen to it, others seek release in playing it. Our research on emotional regulation shows that music is a resource of near-infinite diversity. On the one hand, it represents immersion in happiness, joy and beauty, offering experiences transcending the mundane world, providing relaxation and helping us forget our everyday cares. On the other hand, it creates a safe haven for encountering the darker shades of life, allowing bad feelings to pour out and intimating that someone else hears and understands what we are going through, and acting as a catalyst for more positive and insightful thoughts on our life experiences.

How exactly does music do this? How does music reach our emotions and play on them? An important part of this is that music is an idiom that operates on the emotional level – a language that everyone can understand. Music hits us at a corporeal and affective level. Even infants are able to interpret the emotional communication of their carers by the colour, tone, tempo and rhythm of their speech. Later, the emotional language of music is enriched as we experience more and learn more, acquiring cultural interpretations, memories and symbolic meanings. Yet through all of this we retain the ability to be influenced and influence others at this very primitive emotional level. When the music starts, we are plunged into an experiential wonderland of colour and sound.

The various impact mechanisms of music manifest themselves in the way music creates a variety of moods. Memories play an important role in fostering a sense of belonging together and tenderness. Tempo and tonal colour – or, more generally, what the music sounds like – are important factors for relaxation. Sorrow and melancholy perceived in music may cause painful responses if associated with personal negative memories, but music can also prompt pleasurable sadness where the experience is more about experiencing and enjoying the content of the music.

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There are individual and cultural differences in the emotional responses prompted by music. We compared meaningful musical experiences of people in Finland and in India in one of our studies. In both cultures, respondents underlined the importance of music as a resource recalling happy memories, providing beauty and aesthetic experiences and serving as an everyday emotional tool – a source of relaxation, energy and motivation, of joy and pleasure, and of alleviation for anxiety and stress. What emerged as a clear difference was that Finns more prominently pointed to how music allows you to accept your own vulnerability, to face your personal difficulties and to feel empowered about coping with such difficulties.

The corporeal-affective experiencing of music facilitates not only probing one's own emotions but also a profound, unspoken feeling of community. Through music, we can collectively experience the same mood, whether at a concert, a band rehearsal or a funeral. Music synchronises us, immerses us in the same world of nuances and creates the illusion of us being as one. This is perhaps what many have missed most during the coronavirus pandemic: shared moments of live music.

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However, music does also foster a sense of community over remote connections. Even when we listen to music alone, we are reminded of important moments in our lives, of our loved ones, or even of the feeling that people unknown to us who enjoy the same music share our feelings on some level.

We can hear in music precisely those meanings and experiences that are important to us at any given time, yet at the same time we can feel a shared, unspoken emotional bond with other people. So let's let music connect us with ourselves and with each other! © Translation: Jaakko Mäntyjärvi

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