

Introduction: What is Music?

If you search the keyword “music” in your favorite search engine, you will certainly find an answer (emphasis on an). Here are the first two that came up in this case:

1. S: (n) music (an artistic form of auditory communication incorporating instrumental or vocal tones in a structured and continuous manner)

2. S: (n) music, euphony (any agreeable (pleasing and harmonious) sounds) “he fell asleep to the music of the wind chimes"

3. S: (n) music (musical activity (singing or whistling etc.)) “his music was his central interest"

4. S: (n) music ((music) the sounds produced by singers or musical instruments (or reproductions of such sounds))

5. S: (n) music, medicine (punishment for one's actions) "you have to face the music"; "take your medicine."

Music is an art form in which the medium is sound. Common elements of music are pitch (which governs melody and harmony), rhythm (and its associated concepts tempo, meter, and articulation), dynamics, and the sonic qualities of timbre and texture. The word derives from Greek μουσική (mousike), "(art) of the Muses".\[1\]

While these definitions may sound plausible, it is important to note that these definitions tend to be incomplete and are often biased to the musical and aesthetic preferences of an individual or culture. For example, note Princeton Wordnet's inclusion of the word “euphonious” in one definition of music. Is that really true? Can you think of a composition that most people believe to be music that is also cacophonous?

\[1\] [http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=music](http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=music)

\[2\] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music)
Where did it come from?

Imagine you are a very ancient version of a human being. You might have a spoken language, tools, a family you love, and perhaps you have a regular shelter space you might consider calling home. No books have ever been written. Obviously you don’t go to school. Life is tough - those obnoxious Wooly Mammoths and Saber-tooth tigers keep bothering you and your friends. What snap of cognition would inspire you to represent that Mammoth you saw yesterday on the wall of a cave, and what would have to happen for you and your friends to see the sketch, appreciate the resemblance (without interpreting it as a mammoth), and repeat the action? Perhaps it was a mistake, you accidentally brushed a piece of ash on your wall, and it happened to “look” like the back of that mammoth. You notice it isn’t actually the Mammoth and decide to add more detail to your sketch. Why?

Obviously, drawing on a cave isn’t the same as music. Can you think of a way that music might have come about? What sort of thought, emotion, or experience might inspire your ancient doppelgänger to sing or drum?

The Importance Of The Question

Every culture participates in some form of musical activity, but the activity itself seems somewhat removed from what we tend to consider “useful.” To complicate matters, music resists categorization in evolutionary theory. Was music “invented” to assist in sexual selection, prove fitness, or does it seem to be meant for group participation? Would music be more analogous to the group call of a chimpanzee, a bird song, or is it something altogether different?

It must be said that anything so ubiquitous must have a purpose (a good one), and we must resist the urge to ignore the question and attribute creativity to the muses - however difficult it may be to answer. Even if the question turns out to be impossible to answer, we must ask.

Course Structure

Classes will be held Tuesdays and Thursdays, with readings and activities assigned the Tuesday before the due date, and students should come prepared to present their assignments to the class on the due date. Thursdays will be reserved for demonstrations and lectures having to do with the readings and
assignments. Your grade will weigh heavily on completion of assignments, but class participation is encouraged and can only help your grade.

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Books


Darwin, Charles: *The Expression Of The Emotions In Man And Animals*. New York. 1898
available full-text here:

available full-text here:
http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/WilDori.html


Articles


"Did the Australopithecines sing?". Livingstone, F. Current Anthropology. 14. 25-29. 1973

Links

Diana Deutsch’s Homepage http://deutsch.ucsd.edu/
Space.com articles on sound
http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/mystery_monday_030922.html
http://www.space.com/scienceastronomy/blackhole_note_030909.html

Project Gutenberg
http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page

University Of Virginia’s E-text Library
http://etext.virginia.edu/ebooks/

Audacity - Free Audio Editor
http://audacity.sourceforge.net/

NASA Links
http://science.nasa.gov/headlines/y2003/09sep_blackholesounds.htm

Music/Sound Databases
http://freesound.iua.upf.edu/
http://www.ubu.com/sound/index.html
Week One

Readings       no readings

Assignment A Answer any 3 of the following questions from Larry Polansky’s class:
1. What is music?
2. What is language?
3. Why did music evolve, what adaptive function does it have?
4. Is music a language?
5. Does music have meaning?
6. Does music have grammar (and is there, in a Chomskyian sense, a “universal grammar” for music)?
7. Assume we know that some musical capacity or propensity is innate, preferred, is strong, some is weak. Or were to know that some specific musical ability evolved for a very specific reason. What are the implications of that knowledge for us as musicians? Should we use that capacity more, or less, or…?
8. What is an emotion? Can we say that music has an “emotional meaning”?
9. Is music a human-specific activity?
10. What do you think are a few of the innately musical capacities that humans possess? For example, can all humans (leaving aside amusia for the moment) perceive pitch height differences at some level (some form of contour perception)? What else? Of the ones you mentioned, which are specific to music and thus not integral to language?
Week Two

Readings


   Chapter 23: Human Processing Predispositions and Musical Universals by Sandra Trehub
   Chapter 25: An Ethnomusicologist Contemplates Universals in Musical Sound and Musical Culture by Bruno Nettl
   Chapter 26: The Necessity Of and Problems with a Universal Musicology by François-Bernard Mâche

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Assignment A

Read a basic overview of what many people consider music theory:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_theory

Answer the following questions:
1. What are the 8 elements of music?
2. Do you agree?

Now, find one recording (and manuscript if possible) of traditional folk music from ten of the following regions:

1) Africa
2) America
3) Arab World
4) Asia
5) Caribbean
6) Central America
7) Eastern Asia
8) Eastern Europe
9) Europe
10) Indian Ocean
11) Melanesia
12) Micronesia
13) Middle East
14) North Africa
15) North America
16) Northern Europe
17) Pacific Oceania
18) Polynesia
19) Scandinavia
20) South America
21) South Central Asia
22) Southeast Asia
23) Sub-Sahara Africa
24) Western Asia
25) Western Europe

B

Answer the following questions:
1) Do you think patterns in the folk music corresponded to what you read regarding “basic” music theory?
2) If so, why? If not, why?
3) Music theory aside, what similarities did you hear?
4) List all unique characteristics of each style
5) List all similarities (i.e. define your own limited set of universals)
6) Do neighboring musical communities have more common characteristics than their more-distant peers?
7) If so, what characteristics? Do you think these commonalities are representative of the whole?
8) If not, what would you have to hear to change your mind?
Week Three

Readings

"Fundamental Issues in the Evolutionary Psychology of Music."

available full-text here:
http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/WilDori.html

Pinker, Steven. How the Mind Works, Chapter 8 ("The Meaning of Life")


Assignment A Choose 3 of John Cage’s questions regarding sound, music, or beauty. Try to answer them without contradicting yourself.

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B Re-answer any three of the following questions from Larry Polansky’s class, this time use the readings to defend your previous points or debunk your points. Bring your answers into class:

1) What is music?
2) What is language?
3) Why did music evolve, what adaptive function does it have?
4) Is music a language?
5) Does music have meaning?
6) Does music have grammar (and is there, in a Chomskyian sense, a “universal grammar” for music)?
7) Assume we know that some musical capacity or propensity is innate, preferred, is strong, some is weak. Or were to know that some specific musical ability evolved for a very specific reason. What are the implications of that knowledge for us as musicians? Should we use that capacity more, or less, or…?
8) What is an emotion? Can we say that music has an “emotional meaning”?
9) Is music a human-specific activity?
10) What do you think are a few of the innately musical capacities that humans possess? For example, can all humans (leaving aside amusia for the moment) perceive pitch height differences at some level (some form of contour perception)? What else? Of the ones you mentioned, which are specific to music and thus not integral to language?
Week Four

Readings

Wallin, Merker, Brown: *The Origins Of Music.*
Chapter 6: *The Sound and the Fury: Primate Vocalizations as Reflections of Emotion and Thought* by Marc D. Hauser.


Assignment
A Access the full-text of Darwin’s *The Expression Of The Emotions In Man And Animals.*
Search the full-text using the keyword: “music”

B Copy and paste 10 of your results and the paragraph that the word is located into a text editor.

C Now, choose ten full-text ebooks at random from ten separate authors. Perform the same search, but only select one search result from each source. The source does not have to be in English, but you should be able to translate your results into English.

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D Compare and contrast your excerpts in a few sentences, and bring your writings to class along with your excerpts.

Also, answer the following questions and bring them to class:
1) In what sense is the word music most often used?
2) What sort of things are written about as musical in a literary context that are not traditionally musical?
3) What other themes (if any) are common around the word music?
4) Do these sentences help define music or do they further obfuscate the question?
5) If the question seems more convoluted than ever, what sort of information would help you better understand the topic?
6) Do the literary uses of the word “music” have any commonalities with the universal you came up with?

Week Five
Readings
Wallin, Merker, Brown: *The Origins Of Music.*
Chapter 16: The “Musilanguage” Model of Music Evolution by Stephen Brown

B Spend some time thinking about the last line: “Why should the simple repetition of a phrase, without any change at all, cause our perception to shift so dramatically from speech to song?”

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C  Now, think of the best speaker you have ever heard. If you have never heard anyone speak very well, try to remember the names of individuals that are rumored to be talented speakers. Some names that come to mind when I do this are Martin Luther King Jr, Jackson Mac Low, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Sylvia Plath, etc. Some traits to look for can be found here: http://www.uvm.edu/~debate/code/065.html

D  Choose, Locate and Download a speech, poem, or conversation. Databases include but are not limited to: http://www.ubu.com/sound/index.html http://www.americanrhetoric.com/top100speechesall.html

E  Locate these types of phrases in your recording:
1. An introductory sentence (i.e. “Once upon a time”)  
2. A question (i.e. “Is this the end?”)  
3. A conclusion (i.e. “The End” or “And they all lived happily ever after”)  
4. Copy each of them into a new file to show the class

F  Import the recording into an audio editor like Audacity: http://audacity.sourceforge.net/
If you don’t know how to import/edit audio, follow the Audacity tutorial provided

G  Write a brief statement on what made you chose your speaker, and why you chose the recording you did. Bring your selection as well as your writings into class.
Week Six

Readings
Jaynes, Julian: *The Origins Of Consciousness In The Breakdown Of The Bicameral Mind*. Chapter 3 - Of Poetry And Music


Assignment
A Open your speech selection from last week's assignment
B Locate three 1-3 second clips of vocal inflections you interpret to be the following (hint: it is usually at the end of a sentence):
   1) An introduction (i.e. inflection that suggests that the speaker is “just getting started”)
   2) An incomplete cadence (i.e. inflection that informs the listener that the statement is complete, but there is more to follow)
   3) A question (i.e. What do you mean? Are you with us or against us?)
   4) A complete cadence (i.e. the tonal inflection that tells the listener that he or she has completed a full statement)
C Select your clips, and paste them each into separate project files. Save your work.
D Using the ‘repeat’ effect, loop each clip separately, about 100 or more times a clip. Listen closely and continuously until the verbal meaning is completely lost and only the tonal meaning remains.
E If your selections are not “morphing” after 100 times, shorten the space between them or find a new selection, one with greater inflection
F Order your selections to form a “musilingual” phrase
G Bring your phrase into class
Week Seven

Readings


- Sethares, William: *Tuning, Timbre, Spectrum, Scale*. Chapter 3

Assignment

A  Listen to Alvin Lucier's piece, *I am Sitting In A Room*:
[http://ubu.artmob.ca/sound/source/Lucier-Alvin_Sitting.mp3](http://ubu.artmob.ca/sound/source/Lucier-Alvin_Sitting.mp3)

Listen to Ezra Pound's *Ode Pour L'Election de Son Sepulchre* (2:45)
[http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Pound/1939/Pound-Ezra_04_EP-Ode-Pour-L-Election-de-Son-Sepulchre_Harvard_1939.mp3](http://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Pound/1939/Pound-Ezra_04_EP-Ode-Pour-L-Election-de-Son-Sepulchre_Harvard_1939.mp3)

Select a recording from this website:
[http://www.analogion.com/Kekragarion-FirstMode.html](http://www.analogion.com/Kekragarion-FirstMode.html)

B  Revisit your phrase from last week.

C  This time, listen very closely. Try to sing your phrase, slowing it down if you need to - but be careful not to use the “change time with changing pitch,” but slow down your phrase while retaining the original range.

D  Record yourself singing your phrase

E  Now, try to transcribe your phrase onto an instrument. Enlist a friend to help you if you are having trouble

F  Notate your phrase using whatever notation you wish, make up your own if you need to.

G  Bring your unembellished phrase into class. If, in a surge of inspiration, you decide to embellish your phrase, bring both with you to class.

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H Answer the following questions and bring them into class:
1. Does your phrase have anything in common with the end result of Alvin Lucier’s composition?
2. Does your phrase have anything in common with any kind of music you have heard either in this week’s listening examples or the recordings you found?
3. If you have similarities, do you think your similarities are a coincidence?
4. In your experience, did you find an emotional sentence to be more musical than a monotonous one?

Week Eight-Nine

Readings
Wallin, Merker, Brown: *The Origins Of Music.*
Chapter 27: *Listening To Music: The End of the Beginning*


Assignment
A Compose a 5 minute tape piece using your phrase, or make a new phrase using the same methodology.

B If tape music isn't your thing, feel free to compose an instrumental composition

C Revisit the following questions, you answered earlier, but now answer:
1. How has this class changed your opinions on music?
2. What aspects (if any) have remained the same?
3. If you had to come up with a list of universals, what would they be?

Week Ten

Class concert, party, and presentation of writings