

Scientists, philosophers and musicians gathered at the latest Musical Brain conference to explore whether music is different from other art forms. Claire Jackson reports

Worlds collide



MUSIC CAN EXCITE, INSPIRE, DISMAY, INTRIGUE or calm its listener. It might bring relaxation, positive association or encourage concentration. Those who feel passionate about music marvel at its ability to bring people together, and its power to ignite a multitude of emotions. In recent years there has been a lively debate regarding the extent to which music can change people's minds and bodies. Research has revealed that parts of the brain critical to human development are enlarged by musical experience. But why are there differences between music and other art forms – if differences exist at all?

These were the issues under scrutiny at the recent Musical Brain conference, held at London's Institute of Neurology at the end of 2011. The event brought together scientists, philosophers and musicians to explore the suggestion that music reigns superior, with reference to philosophical, therapeutic and neurological disciplines.

Professor Michael Trimble opened the conference with an informal audience survey, whereby he asked delegates to raise

their hands if they had ever cried while listening to a piece of music. About 99 per cent had, compared with about 70 per cent who had been moved to tears while reading a book and a modest 20 per cent who had cried while looking at a piece of artwork. Though anecdotal, these results replicated those that Trimble has been collating in recent research and refute cognitive scientist Steven Pinker's famous description of music as 'auditory cheesecake'; that is, a nice enough thing but not necessary to the functioning of human life or society.

Self-confessed neurosceptic Professor Roger Scruton caused controversy with his talk 'Can there be a Science of Musical Understanding?', in which he appeared to conclude that science could only go so far. Scruton gave musical examples on the keyboard to illustrate that we still do not understand why we have the natural ability to determine 'wrong' notes. He also drew comparisons between visual and auditory perception, using the example of Titian's *Venus of Urbino* to claim that music is to sound what pictures are to pixels; although the individual building blocks are simple,

the overall effect can influence the entire body. Scruton played an excerpt of Paul Lewis's recording of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 3 to illustrate how neuroscience cannot explain why we enjoy music and how we understand it.

Professor John Onians instantly won kudos from the musicians and music lovers in the audience when he admitted that when he first embarked on his research, he was fearful of anything that might diminish reverence for the greatness of art and admiration for the power of the artist. Onians' lecture examined the prehistoric Chauvet cave paintings in the South of France; images that – according to Onians – were inspired by humans witnessing herds of wild animals migrating through the region, and can therefore be seen as an early example of art based on a neural resource. Later examples were provided, such as the artwork of Dutch sculptor Gerard Caris, whose work is largely based on a single shape – the pentagon. (Onians revealed that he had been engaged in an intellectual tussle with a team of museum curators who maintained that Caris' work was purely mathematical – until presented with Onians' irrefutable evidence).

THE PROFESSOR WENT ON TO SUGGEST THAT humans find it pleasurable to hear music that relates to the birdsong heard in their habitat; for example, in West Africa, the area from which jazz originated, birds make rhythmical and repetitive sounds, typically in the low register. In the woods and fields of Europe, a prime characteristic of birdsong is the call of passerine nest-builders; tuneful and of a high register, perhaps consistent with Western melodies.

Next to the podium were Professor John Sloboda and Dr Biranda Ford from the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, who attempted to answer the age-old question the music industry faces: what can classical musicians learn from other arts about how to build audiences? Naturally, this lecture was of particular interest to many audience members, myself included; and we eagerly waited to hear whether Sloboda and Ford had cracked the Da Vinci code. Their findings, perhaps unsurprisingly, paint a rather bleak picture for the future and sustainability of classical music in the Western world. The duo illustrated a range of examples of organisations that are succeeding in attracting new – and younger – audiences, such as the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, and outlined some methods for achieving this. For example, Sloboda explained that although the plot of a play might be well known, productions differ enormously (with modern sets, costumes etc). By contrast, a classical recital is relatively predictable. The more predictable, the less easy it is to generate the sense of an event. Similarly, classical music can be rather impersonal and passive when compared with other art forms; clapping is confined to certain points and interaction is either non-existent or very regimented. Compare this with an art exhibition, where the viewer takes control of his or her promenade, is able to discuss responses and so on.

The latter part of Sloboda and Ford's presentation suggested that music is so different because there is a sense of duty, on the part of the musician, to the composer and the work. This viewpoint was surmised by Stravinsky when he distinguished between performers: those who are 'executors' and those who are 'interpreters'. Ford suggested one way to improve the standing of classical music would be to re-educate young artists and emphasise that the onus is on them to build a relationship with their audience. It might not have offered the missing formula for audience development, but this lecture clearly indicated that the classical music industry can – and should – take note from the other arts sectors.

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Nietzsche commented: 'Without music, life would be a mistake', and this was the statement with which Professor Raymond Tallis opened the penultimate lecture ('The Purpose of Art and the Role of Music in Therapy'). Tallis suggested that four human hungers exist: while the first three are for the fulfillment of biological and social needs, the fourth is for a true and deep spiritual existence – which can be satisfied via music. Professor Nigel Osborne went on to show some very moving video clips of disabled or disadvantaged children reacting positively to music. The conclusion was relatively simple: music sometimes defies definition in neuroscience, and although it might serve no obvious practical purpose, its psychosocial impact cannot be ignored.

The closing presentation 'Can Music Portray Happiness and Sadness?', by Stephen Johnson with Ian Ritchie, Ian Brown and the Sacconi Quartet, neatly examined the theory put forward by Professor Michael Trimble at the beginning of the conference that music ignites a greater level of emotion than other art forms. Brown played excerpts of music by Beethoven, Bach, Wagner and Haydn to illustrate how compositional techniques affect musical mood. Such a vast topic requires a conference to itself, and there was little opportunity here to do more than scratch the surface.

So, why music? And is music different from the other arts? The answer to the latter has to be yes, for although there are parallels between art forms, it is music that consistently invokes strong emotions. However, we can learn from our neighbours in other artistic fields, and the conference presented a variety of valuable suggestions. Those of us who spend our lives listening, making and enjoying music may wonder why we're drawn to such an existence; and I suspect that no conference, however fascinating, will ever be able to answer that question. 🎵

The next Musical Brain event will examine 'The Beethoven Question: How can art sustain a life that would not otherwise be worth living?' and takes place on 27 and 28 October 2012

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