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THE INDEPENDENT

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Wed, August 23, 2006

Arts & Entertainment ▶

August 23, 2006

Between The covers

By Joan Baum

Though hardly eclipsing the visual arts, music seems to be ever more prominent and pervasive on the East End, with one-time performances, continuing series, expanding annual schedules and more of every genre – classical, rock, jazz, r & b – traditional and innovative, soloists and groups, big-names and talented amateurs. And that's just the events.

Audiences, too, are growing and seem more responsive to music they like and – surprise! – also to music they might not necessarily be familiar with. To judge from chance conversations at several venues, there's a lot of crossover sampling going on. This past July The Who's Tommy got a lot of the AARP set jumping out of their Bay Street Theatre seats, and Pianofest filled every seat at Guild Hall.

Of course, there are many reasons for what appears to be an upsurge of interest in music, hardly peculiar to the East End, but Daniel J. Levitin would argue that the more anyone is exposed to music of any kind, the more likely it is that appreciation will follow. His remarkable book, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*, explores the nature and nurture of this phenomenon and explains why music is unique among human activities, and so compelling.

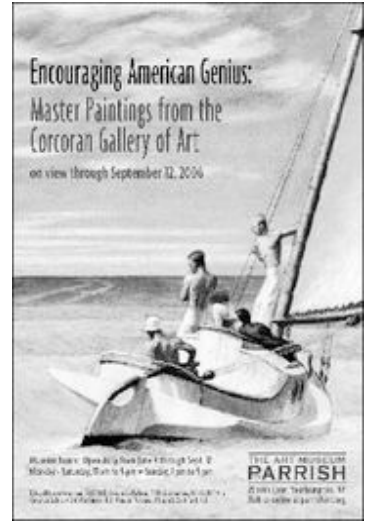
In Dan Levitin, readers could not ask for a more understanding, amusing, accessible and lively guide, a college dropout and rock musician who became a highly successful recording engineer and producer and who eventually went on for a doctorate in cognitive psychology at Harvard and post-doctoral study at the Berkley School of Music. With a multitude of scientific publications behind him and numerous experiments in the works, Levitin runs his own Laboratory for Musical Perception, Cognition and Expertise at McGill University.

He's not just smart (his Ph.D. was on absolute pitch) but amiable and generous. He credits co-workers and memorable mentors, including Oliver Sacks, James Watson and Francis Crick. Even though the neurobiology and music theory can get complicated, Levitin's personal anecdotes (including how his stereo system caught fire in his MIT dorm as he was listening to the Beatles' "Abbey Road" at too high a decibel level) ensure enjoyable reading.

It's impossible to read this book and not learn something that will advance an understanding of and love for music, regardless of genre. Levitin has read widely and deeply, in many disciplines. How often is it that a research scientist can meaningfully scoop up on one page Bach, Steely Dan, Miles Davis, Paul Simon and Gustav Mahler? Nuggets are scattered throughout, such as the fact that MRI scanners were developed by EMI from profits made on Beatles records.

"The story of your brain on music is the story of an exquisite orchestration of brain regions, involving both the oldest and newest parts of the human brain . . . a precision choreography of neurochemical release and uptake between logical prediction systems and emotional reward systems."

In the evolution of human history everyone once was a participant, singing and dancing; there was no separation of performer and audience, Levitin points out. He does not hesitate to knock experts who make non-musicians feel uncomfortable by using complicated technical terms. Although approximately 250 people worldwide are now studying music perception and cognition as their primary research focus, and strides have been made in comprehending



GUILD HALL AT SEVENTY FIVE CELEBRATION WEEKEND

PERSEPHONE
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

NEW YORK CITY OPERA
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Spanish Harlem Orchestra
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Bobby Vinton
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Parsons Dance Company
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Manhattan Transfer
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Peter Frampton
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

David Brenner
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Billy Rudner
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

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WESTHAMPTON BEACH PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Les Bogdanovic
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Spanish Harlem Orchestra
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

New York City Opera
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Bobby Vinton
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Parsons Dance Company
 August 12 & 13
 7:00 PM & 8:00 PM

Manhattan Transfer
 August 12 & 13
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 August 12 & 13
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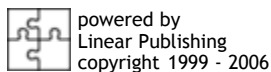
the relationship between specific areas of the brain and particular aspects of music processing, Levitin is out front with his own "biases."

He classifies himself as a humanist empiricist philosopher, partial to Gestalt views and to studies of mind over brain. His goal is to understand "thought processes, memories, emotions, experiences" as they help explain the attractions of, responses to, and evolutionary purposes of, music. But mysteries remain, and Levitin is not out to unweave the rainbow, as Keats might say.

A book for anyone, This is Your Brain On Music should especially appeal to parents who should take to heart what Levitin says about young children learning music, whether or not the little ones continue. Time and again studies show that between the ages of two and four the brain is never going to be as receptive, or memory so informed.

This is Your Brain On Music by Daniel J. Levitin, Dutton, 314 pp., inc. index, biblio, appendices, \$24.95.

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