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Music on the brain

Amy German

"Certainly you can ask people, 'Well, what emotion are you feeling right now?' But a different measure, and one that gives us a window into the brain, is to wire them up to the psycho-biological sensors that measure different aspects of brain activity," says musician and cognitive neuroscientist Daniel Levitin in reference to last Saturday's unprecedented experiment.

In collaboration with the Boston Symphony Orchestra and McGill University, Levitin and a team of 20 others hooked up sensors via high-tech Lycra custom-made shirts to BSO maestro Keith Lockhart, five members of the orchestra and 15 audience participants to gauge their comparative emotional responses to the music. The concert was then rebroadcast on a large screen in Montreal to a separate audience that was also being monitored, to see the difference in terms of psychological arousal and impact between being there and seeing it on a large screen. Heart rate, muscle activation and other physiological responses were monitored, and the idea, says Levitin, was to "understand more about the emotions that are communicated in music from one participant in a concert to another."

"We know relatively little about the brain compared to what we know, say, about other organs of the body, like the heart or the lungs or the kidneys," he says. "The more we know about how it works and how it's wired up and how different parts of the brain support thought, the better able we will be to help repair brain damage in people who have suffered strokes or tumours or other kinds of lesions."

People
 acting
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experiment took in renditions of *The Marriage of Figaro*, a movement from the Mozart clarinet concerto, a movement from another Mozart symphony, and two new pieces by contemporary composer Robert Kapilow, called *Green Eggs and Ham* and *Gertrude McFuzz*, both involving the lyrics of Dr. Seuss.

Though it will take months before the numbers are in, Levitin confirmed that during the experiment "everything seemed to be working properly!"

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