

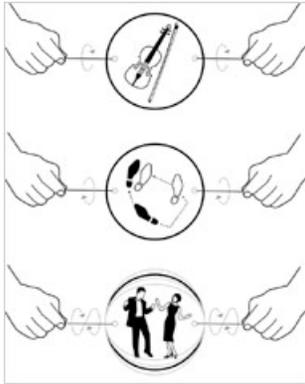


OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Dancing in the Seats

By DANIEL J. LEVITIN
Published: October 26, 2007

Montreal

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Kim Bost

THE fall concert season has begun at music halls around the world, and audiences are again sitting in rapt attention with their hands folded quietly in their laps. Does anyone besides me find this odd?

Through tens of thousands of years of evolutionary history, music has nearly always occurred together with dance. Even today, most of the world's languages use a single word to mean both music and dance. The indivisibility of movement and sound, the anthropologist John Blacking has noted, characterizes music across cultures and across times.

Music and dance have also always been a communal activity, something that everyone participated in. The thought of a musical concert in which a class of professionals performed for a quiet audience was virtually unknown throughout our species' history.

Although the Greeks built amphitheaters, these were typically used for plays, speeches and other public events, not musical performance. The first concert halls for music did not appear until the 17th century in Europe. York Buildings in London is thought to have been the first, in 1678, followed by the Holywell Music Room, built in Oxford in the 1740s. As Anthony Storr, a professor at Oxford, once noted, the advent of concerts by a society's most skilled performers separated performers from listeners. Listeners were no longer expected — or even allowed — to join in.

The ancient connections between music and movement show up in the laboratory. Brain scans that I and my colleagues have performed make it clear that both the motor cortex and cerebellum — the parts of the brain responsible for initiating and coordinating movements — are active during music listening, even when people lie perfectly still. Singing and dancing have been shown to modulate brain chemistry, specifically levels of dopamine, the “feel good” neurotransmitter.

Our species uses music and dance to express various feelings: love, joy, comfort, ceremony, knowledge and friendship. And each one is distinct and widely recognized within cultures. Love songs cause us to move slowly and fluidly, for example, while songs of joy inspire us to dance in a full-body aerobic way.

Our ancient forebears who learned to synchronize the movements of dance were those with the capacity to predict what others around them were going to do, and signal to others what they wanted to do next. These forms of communication may well have helped lead to the formation of larger human communities.

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Some of the strongest bonds in our society are formed by people who march together in military units, as William McNeill, the historian, has pointed out. Members of orchestras and performing groups today likewise develop bonds. As Frank Zappa told me years ago, playing music with other people can be more intimate than any other activity. The turn-taking and accommodation involved call for great amounts of empathy and generosity.

Most of us would be shocked if audience members at a symphony concert got out of their chairs and clapped their hands, whooped, hollered and danced — as people would at a Ludacris concert. But the reaction we have to Ludacris or U2 is closer to our true nature.

Children often demonstrate this nature at classical music concerts, swaying and shouting and generally participating when they feel like it. We adults then train them to act “civilized.” The natural tendency toward movement is thus so internalized, it is manifest in concert halls only as a mild swaying of heads. But our biology hasn’t changed — we would probably have more fun if we moved freely.

Music can be a more satisfying cerebral experience if we let it move us physically. When we hear a chord we like in works by Sibelius or Mahler, our brains want to shout out “Yeah!” When an orchestra builds the timbral mass in Ravel’s “Bolero,” we want to break out of our seats and dance and show how good it feels. Stand up, sit down, shout, let it all out. As the managers of Lincoln Center contemplate renovations, I say rip out some of the seats and give us room to move.

Daniel J. Levitin, a professor of psychology and music at McGill University, is the author of “This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession.”

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