The World in Six Songs by Daniel Levitin

The Sunday Times review by Bee Wilson: an attempt to answer the enthralling question of why and how humans needed music to evolve

On hearing a balloon burst, a baboon will startle. Show the same baboon a pin getting ever nearer a balloon, however, and it will not respond, “no matter how many times they see the pin pop the balloon”. Humans are different, often finding the sight of the pin approaching the balloon more upsetting than the bang itself. The anticipation matters as much as the sound.

For Daniel Levitin (neuroscientist, record producer and keen guitarist) this is just one indication of the ways in which we have adapted for music and music has adapted for us. Frogs may croak and birds may chirp. But only human beings expect certain sounds before they arrive. Only humans can listen to a bunch of notes and predict which notes will follow. Composers play with these expectations, such as Haydn with his deceptive cadences. Levitin’s first book, the brilliant This Is Your Brain on Music, unravelled the ways in which music interacts with our brains. It looked at such questions as how the motor cortex (in conjunction with the Beatles) sets our feet tapping, or why the hippocampus enables us to appreciate Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto No 3.

The World in Six Songs is even more ambitious if ultimately less satisfying. It attempts to answer the enthralling question of why and how humans needed music to evolve as a species.

It is Levitin’s belief that all songs essentially fit into one of six categories (“no less”), each of which corresponds to a basic evolutionary function. There are songs of friendship, joy, religion, knowledge, comfort and, above all, love. Just as none of our ancestors failed to reproduce, none of them, argues Levitin, failed to love music (to which some must be tempted to reply: “you never met my grandparents”). Music was an aid to social co-operation, a means of transmitting knowledge and a defence mechanism. One Amazonian tribe sings for two hours every night, to ward off predators; hippies played John Lennon’s Give Peace a Chance to ward off war. “This might be the song to do it!”

If the categories seem slightly arbitrary, there is still fun to be had in watching Levitin – a man

TIMES RECOMMENDS

The Corner by David Simon & Ed Burns
The Sunday Times Oxford Literary Festival
The Dirty Secrets of Bathtime

FEATURE

The 6 Filthiest Aristocrats
A dirty half-dozen drawn from the grimy upper crust
6 Recession-proof cleaning supplies
The Dirty Secrets of Bathtime

THE ARCHIVE BLOG

T. S. Eliot: Why I won't publish Animal Farm
The World in Six Songs by Daniel Levitin

In every chapter, Levitin raises fundamental questions about why music is bound up in what it is to be human. His answers are always interesting but sometimes frustrating. For one thing, he indulges in incorrigible name-dropping, for ever bringing up conversations he has had over lunch with Joni Mitchell, say, or David Byrne (something he didn't do in his first book). For another, he pursues his evolutionary explanation with a single-mindedness that becomes forced. Natural selection is wheeled out to explain everything from African drum music to the lyrics of I Heard It Through the Grapevine.

Especially jarring are several sections on his good friend Sting. Levitin analyses the lyrics to Sting's Russians ("a literary sensibility, coupled with a real ease of expression") and gives him room to expatiate on how the kind of sounds he makes in De Do Do Do, De Da Da Da correspond to "a caveman just playing with sound". Suddenly, it feels as if Darwin is being used to bolster Levitin's own musical tastes. Evolution might be able to answer the question: why music? But I'm not sure it can tell us: why Sting?

The World in Six Songs by Daniel Levitin
Aurum £14.99 pp368
The World in Six Songs by Daniel Levitin review

Fiction hardback
Fiction paperback

TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Samuel Johnson's message to America
What a novel written in despondency says about the pursuit of happiness

Pushkin's library lyrics
The weighty ideas behind the light verse of Eugene Onegin – and a new direction in Pushkin studies

understand more:

Times Online From the web

The science of music – Times Online effects on the human psyche?
That, in a nutshell, is the question Daniel Levitin asked himself....

Relative Values: Neeme Jarvi and his son Kristjan...are – for example, Beethoven, Brahms and Haydn. And as a conductor myself if I need encouragement or...
February 22, 2009 | Times Online

Lives remembered: Edmund Purdom

...Schubert symphonies, followed by 12 Haydn and 15

See full profile:
Daniel Levitin
Haydn

contact our advertising team for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your advertisement.

Times Online Services: Dating | Jobs | Property Search | Used Cars | Holidays | Births, Marriages, Deaths | Subscriptions

News International associated websites: Globrix Property Search | Property Finder | Milkoround

Copyright 2009 Times Newspapers Ltd. This service is provided on Times Newspapers’ standard Terms and Conditions. Please read our Privacy Policy. To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click here. This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.