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From The Sunday Times

March 29, 2009

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!"

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read in watching Levitin - a man with skittishly broad musical tastes and a light, easy style - fitting songs into his boxes. He is surely right that the miserable dirges of Morrissey are essentially "lullabies" for the disaffected; sad songs encourage the release of prolactin, a tranquillising hormone that helps us "conserve energy" after trauma. And I had never before thought of the Hokey Cokey as a "religious" song. As with other ritualistic songs, Levitin argues, it "guides participants to the proper, rigid, accurate performance of the ritual" - in this case putting your right foot in, out and shaking it all about.

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

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