

Why Do Humans Value Music?

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I intend to begin in the true spirit of the philosophical quest for truth, by questioning the question. To the philosopher, as to any researcher, questions are a very “big deal,” in no small part because the way they are framed influences significantly the way one goes about answering them and consequently the kind of answer that one offers. [1](#)

Although probing the question makes my time constraints even more daunting and forces me to be much more tightly scripted than I prefer, I hope it will help you understand why I favor the kind of answer I do, as well as the kind of answer I prefer to avoid.

My first thoughts as I began to wrestle with this question were, “Who wants to know?” and “Why?” Or in other words, “To what use is the answer to be put?” Such a question might be asked, for instance, in hopes that its answer would substantiate the need for music education, though of course it couldn't: that would require different questions and different arguments, since the fact that something is valued, even for good cause, doesn't necessarily strengthen the case for its being taught. The other problem with approaching the question with advocacy in mind is that advocacy seeks primarily answers that affirm or inspire, eliminating at the outset a range of potentially-viable answers that, while true, might be less useful for advocacy's specific and instrumental purposes. If our real concern is to answer the question as fully as possible, I think it important to avoid presuppositions that might unduly constrain our response.

What kind of presuppositions does the question make? In the first place it makes

for us the assumption that humans DO value music, then asks us to explain why that's the case. But since value comes in all kinds and degrees, it's possible to value music and still have that value be of a lower order than other contenders—so that, for instance, although I value music, I may value other things more. So explaining why people value music doesn't necessarily, or in and of itself, address the issue of music's precarious status in society— if that is what is hoped for in an answer.

Another concern for me, and an even more fundamental one, is the way the question implicitly seems to set humans on one side, music on the other, and then attempts to build a bridge between these two autonomies with the idea of “value.” Admittedly, this is more implicit than explicit in the question, but it is a significant issue for me, for reasons I hope to make clearer in due course.

I have a further, “picky” concern, too; though it's not really not so picky as it may strike you. The best way to get at it may be by asserting bluntly that no-one values music—all of it, all the time. My point is that if and when people value music, it is not “music” they value—the whole of it—but rather particular practices and particular kinds of engagement in particular circumstances. I certainly do not value all music. And what music I value varies, often widely, as a function, among other things, of the particular circumstances in which I find myself. [2](#)

I trust you can see where I'm taking this. The question we have been asked makes assumptions that seem to push my answer in directions with which I'm not entirely comfortable, and feel the need to resist. Perhaps most notably, it seems to solicit a single, definitive, knock-them-dead answer. I am disinclined to offer one because I believe strongly that music is not that kind of thing. When we talk about music we stand on fundamentally human ground, because music is fundamentally human. With that comes all the richness and complexity of the human condition. And I believe that people value such musics as they do, when they do, for all kinds of reasons— reasons as numerous and radically diverse as there are human uses to which musical experiences and practices can be put. We cannot expect to do justice to the expansiveness of musical value in a single evocative phrase of the kind that might fit on a bumper sticker. Musics are humanly intended meanings embedded in human actions, and as such, it is entirely likely that every interest which might find expression in such actions will do so!

We need, then, to be wary of one-size-fits-all answers to this question. [3](#) I also

think it philosophically unwise to ask that our answers be of direct or immediate use to music education, since many of the reasons for which humans value music do not require or necessarily benefit from education. Indeed, some of the reasons people value music may well involve things we would not particularly want to celebrate or encourage. It is important, then, that our answer be open-textured, capable of accommodating the multiplicity and diversity of ways music can be valued, the remarkable number of ways there are to be musical.

Now, despite what you may be thinking at this juncture, let me assure you that I am not utterly dense. Despite certain misgivings, I do think I understand the question's general intent, and am about to hazard at least the beginnings of an answer. But first let me formulate the question in a way that avoids some of the issues and concerns to which I have alluded. Instead of asking why humans value music, let us ask:

Why do humans seem to have such an affinity for experiences and activities that are, in some way or other, musical?

Or, for short:

Why are people musical? 4

My answer begins with the observation that people have such affinities as they do because musical endeavors are elaborations of basic human tendencies, needs, and interests—things we come by naturally, and for which we are more or less hard-wired. This explanation begins not with pieces or compositions, as you can see—with what we might call musical commodities—but rather with basic human dispositions which are embedded in human action and interaction. This starting point is quite deliberate. Various tendencies and interests beget different kinds of music, and different kinds of musical engagement, whose values are functions of the way they serve these tendencies and interests. So humans are musical for a host of reasons, none of which is for all purposes better than all others—any more than any one human tendency can be definitive of the human condition.

Francis Sparshott suggests that among the human tendencies of which music is an elaboration are: knowing (an interest in exploring the limits of the given); gaming (a tendency to transform necessities into values); and patterning (a tendency to impose periodic structure on the particulars of experience). I think Sparshott is

right in this, and that these are highly useful observations; but to his list I think we should probably add a human interest in communication, an interest in participation or collectivity, [5](#) and an interest in similarities and differences. [6](#) Time won't permit me to elaborate on these points here; but note that such interests and tendencies, if indeed humanly basic, will not just manifest themselves musically. They can help us explain why we are drawn to and take satisfaction in things like music, then, but they don't yet say anything specific to music, or tell us why our affinity for music seems so much more remarkable than nonmusical experiences informed by these same basic tendencies and interests.

So I think we need to establish in our answer a place of prominence for the distinct phenomenal qualities of sonorous experience. Here I think not just of its general emotional or 'felt' character, but of its intimacy and refusal to remain at a distance, of its peremptory nature, of its intrusiveness and immediacy. [7](#) We are hard-wired for sound, and with a directness vividly exemplified by our startle reflex and our visceral responses to noise. Musical experience, because of its sonorous roots, is a fundamentally and inextricably bodily or corporeal event. [8](#) It is, I have argued elsewhere, a "somatic semantic." [9](#) Music has what Shepherd and Wicke call a "technology of articulation," [10](#) a hard link to the body through sound which is utterly unique in human experience—or so I believe. And what this suggests for our "why?" question is that one of the most important reasons people are musical is that such experience restores unity and wholeness to body and mind, drawing upon powers that lie dormant and neglected in experience where sound figures marginally, if at all. People are musical because the unique phenomenal nature of music (because of its sonorous roots) fosters experience with a richness and complexity found almost nowhere else in the world. Being musical is a function of one's whole being, in marked contrast to the silent spaces that frame both the disembodied abstraction of rational experience and the detached coolness of visual experience—realms in which we seem to live ever-increasing parts of our lives. Musical engagements put us in the world and in our bodies like nothing else does. [11](#)

But people are also musical because, as I suggested earlier, they are social. Musical experience serves the communal, participatory, and communicative interests of a social human animal. This obviously goes against the grain of some ways we have been taught to think about music, wherein social interests and tendencies are to be regarded as extramusical. They are not, I submit; and drawing a solid conceptual boundary between the musical and the social (regarding the social as a kind of "contextual envelope" into which events 'purely' and 'properly' musical get

inserted) does a great disservice to our understanding of the significance of musical experience. Music is inherently, not incidentally, social. It is, as Charles Keil puts it, our last “great source of participatory consciousness” [12](#)—no mere subjective ‘response’ to a musical ‘stimulus’, and not the product of a hermetic act of cognition. Musical meanings and values are fundamentally intersubjective affairs, and musics play important roles in creating and sustaining both individual and collective identity. The experiential musical field is a performative field, in which we are the music while it lasts [13](#)—but whose residues, I hasten to add, remain long after its sounds have subsided.

From all this I think it also follows that musical domains are fundamentally ethical spaces, [14](#) in that the musical field is only sustained through our complicity with the music as other, and with other people. It is a ritual enactment—or better yet, achievement—of identity. Clearly, these claims require that we dissolve the boundary between music and the people who make and use it. But I hope it’s equally clear that I think that is something we must learn to do. People are musical, at least in part, because musical experience meets their interests and needs as social beings. [15](#)

Now, as Dewey taught us, not all experience is created equal. And what I would like to advance here is that all the foregoing—our cognitive propensities and predilections as humans, the distinctively corporeal nature of sonorous experience, the sociality of musical experience, and its role in creating and sustaining identity—intersect in experience that is musical in a very special way. They converge with an experiential immediacy, of living here-and-now, in a vivid, processually flowing present. This contrasts starkly with the calculus of technical rationality and the acts of material consumption to which contemporary life seems so determined to reduce us. Music restores our human powers of conception, perception, sensation and emotion to their original state of unity, dissolving the obnoxious dualisms in which we live our nonmusical lives. In this sense, it is, I submit, a primordial “logos.” [16](#) But it is at the same time a ritualistic mode of engagement through which people constitute themselves, individually and intersubjectively.

In short, the most prominent features of my answer to “Why are people musical?” are music’s corporeality or embodiment, its sociality, its uniquely processual character, its vivid experiential presentness, and its deep attachments to identity. But having made these claims, it is immediately necessary to qualify them, because each is, after all, contingent: none happens automatically. Music does not exist in the world like rocks and trees do. As a human construction that remains deeply

embedded in human social discourse, it does none of these things without our complicity. I've claimed that music's phenomenal uniqueness is largely a function of the way we are wired for sound, for instance. But sound also manifests itself as speech and as noise—experiences markedly unlike what most of us regard as music. That sound is but music's medium points to music's fragility and elusiveness, reminding us how easily it can slip over into noise. And that, I suspect this is yet another reason that many people hold musical experiences of some kind or other in high esteem: for although sound claiming to be music is everywhere around us, genuinely musical experience with the qualities I have claimed here may always be in shorter supply than we would like. [17](#)

The claims I have made about the uniqueness of sonorous experience should not be mistaken as attributing to musical experience the kind of unity I earlier wanted to resist. For sound, as music's medium, lacks meaning in itself: its phenomenal qualities can support meanings as radically divergent as a Mozart Requiem and the industrial music of Nine Inch Nails. Likewise, there are diverse ways of engagement and multiple musical uses to which these qualities of sound can be put (some highly desirable, others highly undesirable). There are times and circumstances in which people seek out musical experience to savor simply being in musical sound and space together; but as often, what people enjoy is the way music's phenomenal qualities permeate, qualify, or transform other undertakings. We are wrong to designate such experiences “extramusical,” for surely they aren't to those engaged in them. And I think it is precisely music's capacity to insinuate itself into all manner of experience that accounts for its extensive presence in human societies. Music IS THAT kind of thing.

In closing let me leave you with Francis Sparshott's cogent insight that music is 'talk-like': an “improvised way of getting from place to place in a social world,” he puts it. [18](#) I think there is a lot of truth in this observation, and regret that time permits only a nod in its direction here today. We do exist in musical experience much as we exist in conversation. In music we are “alone together,” each participating differently in an event whose very existence rests upon our ethical commitment to the achievement of intersubjective meaning. Like conversation, music is a slippery affair, caught up in relationships and attachments and tacit assumptions that always put it at risk of misunderstanding, inauthenticity, or failure. It proceeds successfully, when it does, by virtue of a kind of flexibility, improvisational fluency, and a deep respect for the contingencies of the situation at hand. We slip in and out of it, understand and misunderstand, feel our way forward, or circle back, or pursue unanticipated but interesting tangents. Music,

like conversation, is the exercise, in the moment, of a kind of practical knowledge, one that draws on everything that we are, even as it shapes who we are becoming. Why do people value it? Why do people converse?! [19](#) For reasons that are as numerous and radically diverse as the uses to which music can be put. But why are we musical? Because of the way sound engages the body; because we are social; because of the limitless ways these facts map onto and enrich human experience; and because musics are potent and unique vehicles for the construction of our personal and social worlds. I have no doubt that Bennett is right: mine is not the final word on these issues. But that is simply because music is not the kind of thing for which there can be a final word. [20](#)

Endnotes

1. Wittgenstein aptly observes that a “philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness” (Philosophical Investigations §255). As usual, he hits the nail squarely on the head. [\[return\]](#)

2. And becoming musically educated has probably made it quite difficult for me to value certain musics I otherwise might have. [\[return\]](#)

3. This refers both for the need to accommodate the facts of music’s profound plurality and diversity, and to the need to recognize the utter contingency of any claim we might wish to make, even for a particular practice. [\[return\]](#)

4. Note that one of the things this does is to dissolve the implicitly dichotomous relationship between music and people, the gap supposedly in need of bridging by value. It is also interesting and important to note how these various formulations of the question relate to the question that preceded the “why do humans value music” version: “why is music essential for all humans?” What I hope can be discerned is a progression away from advocacy and toward philosophy proper; away from defending “what is” and toward describing what is and thinking about what might be. [\[return\]](#)

5. Or “belonging”, as Terry Gates calls it in his response to question number two of MENC’s Vision 2020 project (“Why Study Music?”, in Clifford K. Madsen, ed., Vision 2020: The Housewright Symposium in Music Education, Reston, VA: MENC, 2000). [\[return\]](#)

6. The reference is Sparshott's pivotal essay on Limits and Grounds in P. Alperson's *What is Music?* (New York: Haven Press, 1986). The interest in knowing manifests itself, says Sparshott in our tendency to explore the limits of (in this case) listenable sound. The gaming tendency transforms humanly emitted sound from symptoms of some condition into expressive representations, and eventually into sounds whose production has no apparent point beyond the interest they present in and of themselves. And it is patterning that transforms sounds into artifacts, and perhaps into coherent, recognizable styles. The three tendencies I have added are more prominently social than Sparshott's. As a fundamentally social animal, the human interest in communication finds a suitable elaboration in musical experience. Similarly, musical experience consists in modes of social relation oriented to collective action: the collaborative, participative rituals that lie at music's heart are extensions of this basic tendency to social togetherness (what Keil and Feld call "the urge to merge.") And finally, a basic human tendency to structure their worlds in terms of similarities and differences ("saming and othering", or the "logic of alterity" it has been called) finds in music not just relationships to things properly "intramusical" but to emotive (expression) and bodily (gesture) states. [\[return\]](#)

7. The very things that caused Kant to place music at the bottom of his artistic hierarchy, calling it an 'agreeable' rather than a 'fine' art. [\[return\]](#)

8. I venture to say that such fundamental musical qualities as movement, gesture, timbre, rhythm, and tension/release are each profoundly and inextricably bodily achievements. [\[return\]](#)

9. In a paper delivered to the Mayday Group in Dallas, Texas. Forthcoming in a special edition of the CRME Bulletin. [\[return\]](#)

10. John Shepherd and Peter Wicke. Their book is *Music and Cultural Studies* (my review of which appears in the most recent copy of the CRME Bulletin. [\[return\]](#)

11. The reader might wish to consult the chapter on phenomenology in my *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*. Eleanor Stubbley is among those who write most movingly on this being-in-the-body idea. [\[return\]](#)

12. In *Music Grooves* (with S Feld). [\[return\]](#)

13. ...as TS Eliot put it. Note that because of this strong link to identity, music is an important part of the machinery by which community is created and sustained, and act that is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive (a point which should be applied to the third of my suggested additions to Sparshott's list of basic human tendencies, just before footnote 5). This means, note, that musical activity has a profoundly important ethical and political dimension. [\[return\]](#)

14. This idea of music as an ethical space or ethical encounter is one I take up in considerably more detail in a chapter forthcoming in the second Handbook of Research in Music Teaching and Learning. [\[return\]](#)

15. I hope it is clear that this is what motivated my resistance to the people-value-music formulation. [\[return\]](#)

16. Emphasis here is on "primordial", in contrast, I hope, to the reason-driven logos from which the pejorative "logocentrism" derives its meaning. [\[return\]](#)

17. Lest these references to genuineness and sound claiming to be music be misconstrued as essentialist or elitist, some clarification may be useful. By 'sound claiming to be music' I mean only those sounds that, while musical for others are not, or not yet, constructed musically by me. And the word 'genuine' here refers not to some quality of 'the music', but only to my experience. My intent here is primarily to stress the fragility of musical experience with the qualities I have claimed for it here. It is decidedly not my intent to impute such experience to certain musics in virtue of supposedly intrinsic qualities, qualities in which other musics might necessarily be found deficient. [\[return\]](#)

18. "Aesthetics of Music—Limits and Grounds" in P. Alperson's, What is Music?. [\[return\]](#)

19. I hope I make clear here that what I mean is that asking why people value music is like asking why they talk—or why they are interested in each other. Again, part of the reason I wanted to challenge the question. [\[return\]](#)

20. This last sentence was a hastily improvised reference to a comment made by Bennett Reimer in his introductory remarks, to the effect that since such issues have been debated since time immemorial, he was doubtful his responses or any of

those presented in this forum would be the “final word” on the subject. My intended challenge is that we learn to stop thinking about music as though it were that kind of thing: as a human social construction inextricably embedded in all manner of human practices, it will continue to assume as many values as there are human uses to which it can be put. [\[return\]](#)