Why do songs affect us so deeply?

Suzanne Walters Gray MFA '04

A few years ago my husband started listening to raga, the classical music of North India. It features a singer who improvises a curlicuing melody over the unchanging drone of th tambura strings. At a certain point the tabla (hand drums) kick in, with an ornate 16-beat rhythmic cycle. The music gets faster, the drumming more frenetic, and the vocal line makes dramatic swoops and loops and high quaking ululations. This goes on for a good 30 minutes. My husband found this music to be incredibly expressive: one unique humai voice creating an unbroken and endlessly varied melodic line. I, to put it mildly, did not.

To me raga was about as emotional as hearing a drunk wailing in the street at 3 a.m. It didn't help much when my husband started taking lessons and would practice by emitting low, wavering notes for an unbearable length of time. I knew that my distaste was unfair. Raga is an ancient and rich tradition that demands the highest levels of musical ability its soloists, and as such it deserved my respect. On a practical level, I wanted to like it, just to avoid being the grouchy music police in my house. But even after months of exposu felt nothing for these songs that held my husband rapt.

This got me wondering. It's a truism that music is the most emotionally direct of the arts. Why is music so good at eliciting emotion? And how can a song leave one person sighi and another with her fingers in her ears? I set off to talk to the experts—Sarah Lawrence music faculty—about how, exactly, music conveys emotional weight.

Culture Club

First, it should be said that music isn't inherently emotional, as ethnomusicology teacher Jonathan King pointed out. Otherwise a cowboy would be equally moved by a Chinese as by a Hank Williams ballad. To "get" a piece of music, you have to understand the conventions it's working with—the shared vocabulary that gives the music meaning. The importance of this shared vocabulary is most obvious when considering music from distant cultures, but it also explains differences in musical taste closer to home. If rap musi sounds abrasive to you, or free jazz unmoored, if you've ever sneered at a pop star's use of auto-tune or giggled at a metal vocalist's over-serious growl, this is why. Each is a phr in a language you don't speak fluently.

That communal understanding of what things mean extends to emotional affect, too. For example, in raga, sliding between pitches is an expressive gesture; in Western opera, it' mistake. If you listen to raga without understanding, on some deep level, that that sliding sound is part of the syntax of this emotional language, then the music is not going to s very good to you.

Hear Your Body Talk

King cites the example of the "cry break"—the vocal hitch that makes it sound like the singer is on the verge of tears. We know it best from country songs, but it's a gesture that' heard in music around the world, he says. Part of the reason it's so common is that it reflects our physical experience of sadness so perfectly.

After all, emotions aren't just something that happens in our brains. Our whole bodies are involved. We sigh, we clench our fists, we smile and laugh. Our hearts pound. We weep Music, too, is an embodied experience. As King says, "It comes unbidden. It works its way into your ear. You can't even avoid it. You can't even put your fingers in your ears—it st comes through, it vibrates in your bones." Even the most placid music is a physical experience. And a really good song in any genre compels you to sway along or tap your foot or your head or dance. King suggests that these physical effects of the music produce the emotional feeling, not the other way around. "Your body is moving and your brain is feelir and through these motions and physicality comes the emotion."

Expression Calculator

No one's more physically engaged with music than the musicians who are using their fingers and/or mouths to bring it into the world. A score sitting on a table isn't really a song has to be performed to come alive. And it's different every time. As voice teacher and opera singer Eddye Pierce-Young says, "Every voice is different." Even in the most tightly scripted music, "just by the sound of the voice, the timbre or the texture of the voice, there is going to be some emotional impact on the music that's being presented."

In jazz and rock music, to name two examples, audiences often judge the quality of a performance by whether the musician seems to be "feeling it." If they're really engaged with emotion of the song, that's good; if they seem mechanical or disconnected, that's bad. (Just think of how incensed we get when we find out a performer is lip-syncing!) But how important is it that the musicians actually feel the emotions they're trying to express?

Not very, says Pierce-Young. Singers are professionals, and it's their job to convey the feeling that the composer is trying to communicate; if they're doing their job right, the feel will come through regardless of the mood they're in. Glenn Alexander, guitar teacher and director of jazz studies, agrees. "All truly great performers are past the technical aspect the music," he says. They've practiced the song so many times that there's no thinking involved in the execution. And what's left is pure emotion.

The Saddest of Keys

In one of the more enduring jokes in *This Is Spinal Tap*, lead guitarist Nigel Turfnel explains that his new power ballad is written in D minor, "the saddest of all keys." ("I don't kno why but it makes people weep instantly.") But everyone I talked to agreed that it's not the key, interval, or chord form that evokes a particular response—it's what you do with it counts. Even saying that a minor key sounds sad is too simplistic and perhaps even insulting to the key's flavor and tonal possibilities.

But the early days of Western musical theory did involve assertions about the emotional qualities of particular notes and intervals, says Chet Biscardi, composer and director of music program. The Greeks, who described the mathematics that underlie harmonic relationships, also assigned moods and moral characteristics to different modes. In the Mid Ages, the Catholic Church banned the use of "the devil's interval"—the augmented fourth (for example, C to F#, which is now popular in heavy metal)—because it was dissonant and "dangerous." And over the centuries, various doctrines arose that specified intervals and patterns to evoke the appropriate feeling for a funeral lament, say, or a love song.

In 1806, German poet and composer Christian Schubart catalogued the mood and purpose of each key. Apparently Nigel Turfnel was a half-step off: Schubart describes D# min embodying "feelings of the anxiety of the soul's deepest distress, of brooding despair, of blackest depression, of the most gloomy condition of the soul. Every fear, every hesitati the shuddering heart, breathes out of horrible D# minor. If ghosts could speak, their speech would approximate this key."

(Whereas D minor merely represents "melancholy womanliness." Which presumably means it's the key for cramps—sorry, Nigel.)

The Ear of the Composer

Even if such things were taken seriously at the time (which, at least in Schubart's case, is debatable), they certainly aren't today. Modern composed music avails itself of a virtu unlimited palette of tones and textures, which might explain why Biscardi rolled his eyes (to himself, as he reported later) when I e-mailed him asking how music makes us feel "Part of me wants to say, 'Are you kidding? Let's not go down this road,'" he said when we spoke. For him, the emotions conjured by art music are too ineffable, and the gestures evoke them too idiosyncratic, to be easily explained.

When Biscardi composes, he's not following any overt recommendations to create a feeling; he works until "it just feels right." (Eddye Pierce-Young has a similar stance: "There aren't a lot of tricks" to conveying emotion, she says.) And the mood Biscardi is painting can't be reduced to "this is angry, this is sad, or joyful or nostalgic or sentimental. You m hear that, but I'm going for other feelings that are almost undefinable."

Consider Biscardi's description of the final section of *Sailors and Dreamers*, the opera he wrote with Shirley Kaplan (theatre): "I was trying to evoke what you feel like when you' out on the sea and it's foggy, and it's night, and you see distant lights or you hear distant bells, and you feel that kind of loneliness but also the comfort of it. It's almost like a beckoning to go out and find something new." Such atmosphere just can't be parsed in a mechanistic way.

And everyone has his or her own approach—especially in the last hundred years or so, as composers have embraced all manner of tonalities and dissonances and compositiona approaches. "From composer to composer, everybody has their own language. Which makes it difficult for a lot of people to understand new music, because it's like learning a w world just for one composer," Biscardi says. The shared vocabulary is still there, but it's much more specific than in other genres.

Tension and Resolution

Glenn Alexander, director of jazz studies, had the opposite response: he practically apologized for the mechanical underpinnings of emotion in music. "I've played music my whc life, and I feel emotional when I play music and I feel that way when I listen to it," he says, "but unfortunately it does come down to mostly mechanical devices" that trigger those feelings.

He uses Billie Holiday as an example. She was an incredibly emotional jazz singer, he says, not because she had an amazing voice—"she did not have a particularly good instrum —it's nasally, it's thin"—but because she had an extraordinary sense of timing.

Every song has an underlying pulse, Alexander says, and when the rhythm section is locked into it, the soloist or singer can pull or push on the beat for dramatic effect. When Hc hesitates before a note, starting her phrases just a bit behind that pulse, "it causes tension, it just sucks you right in." The tension grows as her timing moves further from the be but "when she resolves the phrase at the end, you get this sense of release—and *that* we interpret as emotion."

Alexander explains that emotion in music is all about tension and resolution. A tune climbs away from the root note and our ear longs for it to return; we're captivated by the sto melody tells, and when it finally returns home at the end of the verse, we get a hit of satisfaction. The same thing happens when a singer starts out singing a flat note (or microt

more professionally) and slides up to the right pitch, Alexander says. It takes us on a journey. In the blues particularly, “It’s behind the beat, it’s out of tune,” but when the rhythm pitch finally resolve, “it’s like sex. It is. It’s like, wow, that was so amazing.”

The Sweetest Sound

About a year after the raga craze took over my house, I joined my husband for a 10-week class with his teacher. Though I still wasn’t a fan of the music, I could hear how the care pitch training and the yoga-like instruction on how to seat the voice in the body had improved my husband’s singing.

I liked raga a lot better after I had tried it myself. Maybe this gets back to what Jonathan King was saying about embodied experience. My husband had already told me almost everything the teacher explained in class, but by actually doing the exercises, with my own breath and my own body, I gained an appreciation of what the great singers had achie Raga started to make sense to me in a way it never had before.

A while later we attended a performance where our teacher sang, sitting on a rug in a dark, drafty warehouse, surrounded by candles. The intricate melody curled like smoke to t heavens, an offering, an apology, an assertion of joy, with a cry break thrown in here or there for maximum effect. There in the dark I finally felt it, the longing and sorrow and wo and all the nameless human feelings unspooling from a single voice.

Suzanne Walters Gray MFA ’04 is still not much of a raga singer, but she rocks the electric bass pretty hard.

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