

# MUSIC: WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

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## THE RISING SUN

I first heard *The House of the Rising Sun* as a child, one night in bed, when I was supposed to be going to sleep. I'd recently been given a big old radio, the size of a toaster, and I was turning its Bakelite knob when this sound came out of the static. I didn't know then they were called The Animals, but the name was well chosen. I don't like to speak of impact where the arts are concerned, because it gives a falsely one-sided idea of what happens in artistic experience, but hearing that sound really was like being hit. The guitar's electric opening notes, the singer's lived-in voice, the acidic, swirling organ, the complex storytelling (a woman's tragedy inexplicably voiced by a man) and the arrangement that builds through layers of pain and despair—I had literally never heard anything like it.

Nor had anyone else. Even Bob Dylan, who'd recorded the song on his first album three years earlier, says he jumped out of his seat when he heard it on a car radio. That record, which topped the British and American pop charts in the summer of 1964, was like a meteorite that smashed into pop music and sent it spinning away on a completely new course. It did so not only because of its own musical power but also because of how people responded to it. Both its creation and its effect are inseparable from its time and place: lucky Animals, lucky listeners. This duality—a kind of creative cooperation between speaker and hearer that exists in all art forms—should be understood by every artist, but especially perhaps those who work with non-professionals in community contexts, and I'll return to it.

Hearing The Animals' recording of *The House of the Rising Sun* changed my life, not because anyone intended that it would, but because of how I reacted to the experience. It introduced me to ways of responding to, expressing and sharing what it is to be alive of which I, as a small child, was entirely unaware. It began a lifelong relationship with music that has been incalculably enriching. It has led me constantly to seek out new musical experiences, to learn about music practically and theoretically and to reflect on what it means to me personally and to human beings socially, philosophically and culturally. If I draw on my own experience to speak about those questions today, it is not because there is anything special about that experience but precisely because it is, like everyone else's, both ordinary and unique: a regular marvel. But I also hope that, by placing myself in this

story, I will hold onto a core truth about art, which is simply that it is always, inescapably and wonderfully, personal. It exists only in our minds and, as a result, it is one of the best ways we have of reaching out to one another in our ultimate aloneness.

### ORGANISED SOUND

Music, which has no permanent or visible existence, is an art form particularly well suited to explore those ideas because it is impossible to mistake the art for the object that enables its transmission. Music is not an instrument, a score, a recital, a record or a gig, though they and many other sophisticated technical innovations enable and support its creation and distribution. Music is not a performance, or even the recording of a performance: it can exist without a musician, though a human intelligence must at least start the ball rolling. In the words of French composer Edgard Varèse, music is organised sound. It's a beautiful phrase that, unlike almost every other definition of art, manages to be clear, unpretentious and genuinely universal, crossing cultures with ease. But it is also a deceptively simple idea that merits some unpacking.

Let's take the second word first: sound. What I heard in Hilton Valentine's guitar arpeggios, still one of the most recognisable openings in recorded music, was pure sound. And it was thrilling. I'm good with words, but I cannot explain why that sound is exciting and moving, why it gave me pleasure to hear. I just liked it, instantly and deeply, the way one can like an arrangement of colours or the taste of olives. Music's nature as sound gives it some distinctive qualities as an art form. Although it cannot be seen, music is physical and can produce instant and powerful effects on our bodies. It can calm and reassure, excite or even be experienced as a violent assault that will have us cover our ears or run away. No other art form affects us in such immediate, non-rational and physical ways. But if its effects can be instant, they can also demand time. You can stroll through a gallery and think you have seen an exhibition because you've glanced for a few seconds at the paintings. You can train yourself to skim read texts. But there is no such thing as speed listening: it is not possible to hear Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony without giving an hour and twenty minutes to the experience. But it is also possible to hear it without listening: we talk of background music, but not background novels or theatre. All art rewards attention, but in none is the spectrum of engagement so broad as in music. So music really is what we make of it. There's no accounting for taste, as this and other proverbs have said for centuries. How we hear music is a personal experience that can neither be explained nor justified. But, because of the second part of Varèse's definition, because we are human beings, we do try very hard to do both.

It is in organisation that sound becomes music. Organisation changes everything. It can make sounds enjoyable that we would otherwise avoid: people who love Neil Young's guitar feedback would cross the road if they heard the sound coming from a building site. It is organisation that makes sound tell stories and evoke feelings: it is what can make Verdi's *Quattro pezzi sacri* a religious experience for some listeners, although the composer was, according to his second wife, 'a man of little faith'. It is organisation that can make music—an essentially abstract art—inflame people's feelings to dangerous degrees: there have been riots after concerts and banning records remains a divisive issue, as the BBC found again last year when Margaret Thatcher's enemies pushed *Ding-Dong! The*

*Witch is Dead*, to second place in the pop charts. It is organisation that has made music an instrument of war, from ancient horns to the drums and trumpets of Waterloo: the role of Balkan Turbo-Folk in expressing ideological hatreds during the Yugoslavia wars in the 1990s remains so contested that the Wikipedia article on the subject has its own dispute page. It is organisation, in short, that gives sound *meaning*, and so turns it into music, into art, like Rumpelstiltskin spinning straw into gold, all his power held in the meaning of his meaningless name. Organisation is the difference between sound and music.

### WORKING OUT WHO YOU ARE

So music is, before anything else and after anything else, a source of pleasure. If we didn't enjoy it, we wouldn't create it or listen to it. But I want to go a bit further, perhaps too far, and suggest that, of all the arts, it is particularly hard to respond dishonestly to music. Because its physical impact on our bodies is immediate and non-rational, we know whether we like something almost before we're aware of hearing it. Many years ago, when Radio 1's playlist had more cultural significance than it does today, I was shocked to hear a producer say that he knew from the first ten seconds of a record whether it was worth hearing any more. Now I think he just meant that if he didn't like a song and see it fitting the station in its opening bars, he knew that what followed would not change his mind. So, on reflection, perhaps that is a kind of speed listening. The point is that it's very difficult to persuade someone to listen to music they don't like.

For example, for much of my life I thought classical music was tedious and worthy. I knew it was supposed to be great art, that it had given deep pleasure to countless people for centuries, and that it was central to any understanding of Western culture. But if someone put on Mozart or Fauré the music would wash past me unnoticed: if I did try to listen, I could find nothing there to hold my attention. But my lack of interest was not due to lack of exposure, despite what many arts educators believe. I was taken to concerts as a child and one of my siblings was training to be a violinist. Even wanting to impress a girlfriend was not enough to make orchestral music anything but boring. But in middle age, inexplicably, classical music spoke to me, and for a while I became so obsessed with it that I listened to nothing else. For whatever unfathomable reasons, I was ready for it and it spoke to me.

That is why music is not very price sensitive. I paid £75 to see Leonard Cohen at Manchester Opera House, and thought it a bargain: I wouldn't give you 50p for Madonna. We can pretend, to ourselves and to others, that we like art or culture that actually we don't much enjoy, and we do because there's social pressure to be seen as a certain kind of person. It's not so hard to wander through the latest trendy exhibition or feign interest in some cool TV series, but few of us will sit through a concert we don't like. We might pay tribute to music we don't listen to, much as more politicians claim to read Trollope than do, but we know what we like: our CD collections or iTunes libraries tell the truth.

So that's another thing that music is good for: finding out who we are. As we grow up, we discover music that gives us pleasure and is meaningful. In doing so, we work out what kind of people we are, what we believe and care for and, by extension, what we don't. In saying that I'd rather listen to Leonard Cohen than Madonna, I'm not just expressing a preference or a taste: I'm defining, at least in part, a cultural, ethical and intel-

lectual world I identify with and another that I reject. Of course, human beings are very complex. Many people enjoy Cohen and Madonna, at different times, in different ways and for different reasons. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that it was the sign of a first class mind to be able to hold two contradictory ideas at once: I think he was flattering himself. Human beings do it all the time. Our minds are capacious and we can stuff in all sorts of inconsistent ideas to be drawn on as and when wanted. And when it comes to our tastes, there are equally broad variations. The music I like is organised in a complicated and changeable ranking that embraces all sorts of ideas and feelings. Right now, I've gone back to Wilko Johnson because I've been moved by his extraordinary response to being diagnosed with inoperable cancer. Perhaps the most important distinction is between music that I've liked throughout my life and music that I loved at a particular time, with which it is always associated, but that I don't need or want to listen to any more. Its importance now lies in the distance it marks between I am and who I was, or between who I am consistently and who I've tried out being, to see what it felt like.

So music is a powerful way of understanding, defining and testing identity. When I was young, friendships were made on the basis of shared musical enthusiasms. Being the only kids in school who like Kevin Coyne is to be in a club whose members hold secret knowledge and can look down on the sad types who prefer Eric Clapton or Wishbone Ash. What's exciting and frightening, when you're young, is the changeability of identity as you explore, discover and outgrow different ways of being in the world, different groups to identify with. Music allows us to learn not just about ourselves but also about people who are very different from us. *The House of the Rising Sun* is the story of a New Orleans prostitute, though it took me a long time to get it and longer still to know enough of the life of poor black women in segregation America to appreciate the full bitterness of the song. What understanding I have of black people's experience has been partly shaped by listening to Chuck Berry and Nina Simone, Gil Scott Heron and Mavis Staples, Joan Armatrading and Linton Kwesi Johnson, Angélique Kidjo and Archie Roach, among others. I could say as much of many other lives, many other ways of being human, that are different from the particular one that is mine. Music has taught me as much, perhaps more, about other people's experience as any art form. And it has done so as a friend, never as a teacher. It has been experiential learning—exciting, passionate and some of the best fun you can have between your ears.

### PLAYING TO GROW

So music brings intense, immediate pleasures, it creates and shares meaning, it helps us understand honestly who we are and who we have been, it establishes bonds of solidarity and it helps us understand, however incompletely, what it is to be someone else, to have experiences we will, can, never have. And it does all that in ways that no other art form can do—not better, just differently. Surely, that quick run through of what music can give is enough to say what it is good for.

Yes and no. For most people it's more than enough, since they've no need to have it explained to them. They play and listen to, share and enjoy music without official help or permission, and I'm sure they will for as long as there are people. The explanations aren't needed by anyone who loves music. They're needed by administrators, policy-makers

and governments who set out for complicated reasons, some better than others, to encourage the creation and social enjoyment of music. That encouragement takes many forms and touches aspects of musical life as different as education, broadcasting and the creative industries, but the area of most immediate concern today is community music. And since I imagine I've been invited because of my work on the value of participation in the arts, I will say something about music's value in that context. But before I do, let me stress that music would have no value in a community context if it did not already have the vital qualities that I have just described. So the question is how might those intrinsic qualities support other, additional positive personal and social outcomes?

It's 20 years since I began doing research into the social outcomes of participating in the arts, and much has happened in the intervening years. My original motivation was a desire to understand better what I had observed as a community arts worker during the preceding fifteen years. I had seen at first hand how much the artistic and social experiences people could mean to them, and the many ways in which they changed as a result. I believed—and still do—that these were important aspects of what we all get from social participation in general and from the arts in particular, but I needed to learn a lot, practically and theoretically, to understand better what was going on. Between 1995 and 1997 I led a research project with colleagues, based around a series of case studies of community-based arts activity from the Outer Hebrides to Portsmouth. The resulting report, *Use or Ornament?*, was published in 1997 and it established concepts about the social outcomes of participation in the arts that still shape thinking about these questions today. It has been criticised from different perspectives, but its rather cautious conclusions have not been shown to be wrong. And though my own thinking has developed a lot since then, I think it remains broadly true, as I wrote 17 years ago, that participation in arts activities brings social benefits; that the benefits are integral to the act of participation; that the results are complex but understandable; and that they can be assessed and planned for. Note the difference between the suggestion that something can be planned and that it can be planned *for*: the first is directive, while the second is enabling. I believe, as I said then, that the creativity, openness and elasticity of the arts are the roots of their social outcomes and that both good art and good outcomes depended on creating an environment for success rather than trying to produce certain results.

People gain many and diverse benefits from participating in community music and other artistic activities, from new skills and confidence to enhanced social networks and deeper knowledge. These outcomes are, I'm sure, too familiar to need repeating today, whether from your own experience in community music, from your studies or both. For many years, I have thought that the important question is not *whether* there are social benefits to participation in the arts—I should be interested in any attempt to show that there were not—but *how and why* those benefits emerge. What I didn't understand in 1997, or indeed for many years, was that my suggestions that benefits exist and can be planned for (in the sense of being taken into account when planning a project) would be interpreted as saying that these benefits exist and can be delivered.

Nothing worth having about artistic experiences can be delivered. It can only be enabled. Let me take you back to the ten year old child hearing *The House of the Rising Sun* for the first time. It's not just that The Animals didn't intend to produce any effect in

me or any other listener, other than to excite and give them pleasure. It's that to do even that was absolutely beyond their control. They could only arrange, perform and record the best music they could. What any of us made of it, whether we liked it or not, whether it turbocharged the British Invasion of the American charts begun by the Beatles, whether it would be played in a conference on Tyneside, where the Animals had started, fifty years later—all that was down to the listeners not the players. And the same is true of community music, and of every other kind of music that exists. The only thing a musician can control, and that's all but impossible already, is how well and how creatively they play. The rest is up to those who listen, and the reasons they might want to include, but are not limited to, those I've already mentioned: for pleasure and delight, for feeling and excitement, for meaning, personal and shared, for the windows music opens in our own hearts and lives and into those of people who are so different from us and yet perhaps more similar than we know. If we trust music to do that, and work at enabling it to that as well as we can, the rest will take care of itself. People will get the multiple, complex and enriching experiences from it that make sense to them, not what the musician or the politician might, even with the best of intentions, believe they should get. Music, and its benefits, can only be allowed to happen. It cannot be forced.

In the 1970s, at a time when we were less anxious about many things than we are today, there was a vogue for adventure playgrounds in which young people could scramble about, get dirty, build dens and invent games with only minimal adult supervision. It was a good idea, I think: we all need a bit of freedom and wildness, if we are to grow. Most of the adventure playgrounds have gone or been sanitised to meet the standards of today's more fearful culture. Music, though, cannot be tamed. It is one of our very best adventure playgrounds.

Music. What is good for? Playing.