

## Review: "The Music Instinct" by Phillip Ball

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It was with somewhat of a positive bias that I approached this volume, here is a book by a highly regarded science writer on a subject I care deeply about. In fact, another book by the same author ("Critical Mass") has pride of place on my bookshelf right next to the book which inspired the name, Stephen Pinker's acclaimed "The Language Instinct". In some ways "The Music Instinct" can be seen as a reaction to a somewhat famous claim made by Pinker in his subsequent work ("How the mind works"), that music is 'evolutionary cheesecake', a pleasant but useless by-product of the mental machinery without any evolutionary role in shaping its function. Yet ultimately Ball's work it left me feeling somewhat unsatisfied overall.

Now, I want to make it abundantly clear at the outset that this was a really good book. Certainly as a literature review, it is simply outstanding in breadth and in the depth of analysis. Yet, perhaps precisely because of that breadth it felt as though Ball was trying to pander to too many positions, trying to deny Pinker's position while discovering that simultaneously that there are many ostensibly good reasons for that position and that denying it is not a simple matter.

To understand the problem one must first understand the fundamental problem of musicological scholarship, which is: Can music have meaning in any recognisable sense, or is it just an incoherent sensational experience upon which we project ad hoc linguistic, logical and pictorial ideas? Can music say anything in a definable way? This is an enormous problem and a great schism dating back more than a hundred years in musical scholarship.

On the one side the argument runs that understanding music is simply a formal matter, it has no content other than itself its formal construction. When we listen to and appreciate music it is these formal constructional elements we attend to and by the same analogy as a weeping willow looks sad we confer emotional attributes on something which has none. A weeping willow is not sad, and when someone plants one s/he is not expressing sadness, even if s/he intends for us to experience sadness when we see it. Furthermore, there is no sense in which we could justifiably construct a dictionary of musical expressions that isn't a product social or cultural convention or personal interpretation: What a fugue means to me may be something completely different to what it means to you and there is no way to establish which the "right" interpretation is.

On the other side argument runs like this: "And so what if that is the case?" Can we not say the same thing of language? If I tell you a sad story intending for you to become sad does that mean the story is not expressing sadness? Surely the story itself (the words themselves) is not sad, and if it is in a book the book is not sad, I may not have been sad myself when I wrote the story, I may not have been sad when I read it either. Surely "expressing sadness" means

just that when I read it to you I hope that you will perceive it as I intended for you to perceive it.

“Aha!”, you may say, “but what of the inability to express something which we can reliably talk about in an objective sense?” Again I would reply that this is true but it is not the test to which we put language: When I say the word “apple” you do not know what colour or exact shape the thing is I am referring to, no two dictionary definitions will be exactly the same. The concept “apple” is simply a nebulous set of properties which can fairly reliably get you to think of the thing I want you to think of, there is no exact meaning to any word or sentence to begin with.

One source of the problem is that the musical tradition of Europe has allowed, mostly by the accident of an effective practical notation system, a somewhat unique tradition of poetic and philosophical music to evolve. So in a very real sense, trying to understand the meaning of music through the lens of this tradition is as pointless as trying to learn English by studying the collected works of e.e. cummings, or learning German by reading Hegel. When we want to answer the question “What does music mean?”, we should not look to this style or that tradition, music is no more Rock and Roll than language is “management speak”, instead we should look to the most banal of nursery rhyme, dance tune or lullaby. Music is for invoking moods and synchronising action, and it does so as effectively as language does shopping lists.

Despite apparently struggling with this issue it seems that Ball hints very strongly throughout at what I believe is the correct conclusion, and a little more perseverance would have yielded the answer: The right question to ask was never “What kind of language is music?”, but “What kind of music is language?”. After all, Ball cites several studies which all point to the fact that there is no easy cut-off point where language is distinct from music, and while music is a whole brain process language is a specialized module (to use Pinker’s terminology). To put this into semiotic terms: Language is that kind of music which only has meaning in that it denotes something, it always collapses the connotative mesh of meanings while music can do this at times, but not always and not necessarily.

What then of the function of music? Again we can see that music is the general process and language the specific, so it makes as much sense to say that music does not serve a purpose as it would be to say that driving a car serves no purpose, only driving it someplace specific does. Well, driving a car always serves a purpose, even if the only purpose is the act of driving itself. Sometimes driving serves a particular purpose (going to the shops), but that purpose only exists within the more general range of purposes for driving a car. Language can also invoke moods, and language can synchronize action but it can only do so in specific cases when you already know what a quick march is, or how a waltz feels, or how it feels to fall asleep. For all the endless other cases where there is no definite pre-existing socially constructed denotative shortcut, music serves. Just as there are more places where one can go than there are names of places to go to, there are more things to express than there are words to express. Music serves to communicate where it is simply not feasible for language to distinguish.

But music does this by specifying the how, not the what. Music is about the driving, not where we are going. Language is about where we are going, regardless of how we get there. That is why music expresses feeling and has such a strong emotional component: It feels different to drive to one place than it would to take a bus, even if the outcome is the same. It feels

different to simply denote an apple with "apple" than it would to express the same thing by referring to its character "red, round, smooth, crunchy..."

Ultimately, for effective communication both language and music is needed, neither is better at what the other does well.