

Music – What It Is and How It Affects Us So Powerfully

By Todd Lerner

When you listen to certain parts of music you love, it's as if your living-center shifts into a sweet place where everything seems right for a moment. How does music do that? What's going on?

Music can impact us so deeply because it invokes the very way in which humans think, and thinking is what being human is all about. But first let's back up and briefly lay some groundwork so we can better understand the relationship between music and thinking...

A few words about notes and chords

Imagine someone tuning a guitar and you hear the pitch bend as it rises and falls. Out of this continuous sweep of tone a particular frequency is selected. Let's say the designated note is what musicians call G.

This chosen G note now establishes a context by which other notes are appointed, notes which have a certain mathematical relationship to G. The result is a set of tones which share harmonic similarities – a musical scale. Some note combinations have stronger bonds than others. The note G, for example, has very significant ties to the notes C and E. In fact, when C, E, and G are played together the listener's mind groups them into one pleasant-sounding unit which in music is the *chord C major*.

But we can then take the same G note and group it with different harmonically-related tones, like B and D. Sounded together those notes form the *chord G major*.

Now, a look at the mind and concepts

Just like a certain note is chosen from the continuum of possible tones, so too a particular thing in the world can be selected by the human mind from out of the continuous span of existence.

For example, you can look around the supermarket and fix your focus on a red tomato. Then other things with related attributes can be considered, like a red felt-tip marker and a red scarf (see Figure 1, at right). When you hold these objects together in your mind to regard their similar color, you have made a mental grouping, which is the *concept Red*. You can then look at the

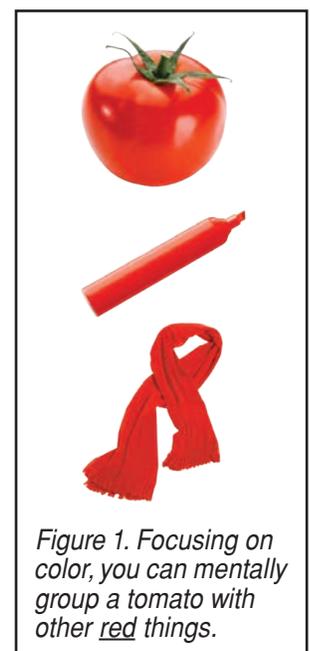


Figure 1. Focusing on color, you can mentally group a tomato with other red things.

by grouping and regrouping things into different concepts as needed.

If the song lyrics were rewritten to describe what was happening in the conceptual realm, instead of “Rock-a-bye baby on the tree top” one could sing with cognitive pride: “Red things I see that can also be Round...”

Melody is like mental movement

A melodic line of notes leads the way in music from one underlying chord to another. This movement is like the mind in motion forming one concept after another. And where melody moves through time in rhythm, thinking progresses to the heartbeat of a human lifespan.

Why music feels so good

Patterns and relationships can be detected everywhere. As concept formation increases in complexity, you can continue to expend greater mental effort. You are able to understand more and more of the world. You can thereby survive, succeed, and achieve happiness...

But music is special because your brain can rest for a while from the task of full conscious work. You can just *listen* and experience the integration process happening almost magically. It's a thrill similar to what it must be like taking big easy steps walking on the Moon.

Music feels so good because it's an affirmation. It confirms the proper human method of existence.

Todd Lerner is a writer and a musician, email him at todd@toddandjingyu.com with any questions or comments about this article. (Hear Todd and Jingyu's album of boy/girl songs if you'd like, at: ToddandJingyu.com)

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