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Roots of Musicality
Music Therapy and Personal Development

Daniel Perret

Foreword by Colwyn Trevarthen

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Contents

Foreword: Finding New Energy for Life in Music Shared 7
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Introduction 16

1 The Psycho-energetic Approach to Music 26
Observing energy 26
Inborn spiritual qualities: the key 27
Energy fields and their functions 31
Consciousness growth 35
Musicality and consciousness 36
The effects of musical and other sounds on our energy fields 44
Five factors determining the effects of sound 46

2 The Five Elements in Music 50
Qualitative observation 50
Thousand-year-old traditions 52
Earth 59
Water 64
Fire 73
Air 78
Space 81
The five elements in Chinese and Tibetan traditions 84

3 Neuro-musical Thresholds 88
A long-term observation 88
Some notions about our brain 93
Biological roots of musicality 101
Pathologies and evolutionary disharmonies 103
Sound and autism 105
The elementary thresholds: axes of work in childhood 108
The major neuro-musical thresholds 112
Permanent goals in (musical) expression 129
Parallel changes in the general behaviour of the person 132
4 Teacher, Musician, Therapist or Shaman?

Therapy and development: two approaches – one axis
Three levels of teaching: shamanic, tantric and essence
Improvisation: some basic rules
Feeling
Consciousness, listening and guidance
Lucid trance
Inspiration and visionary work

Conclusion

APPENDIX 1: MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS
APPENDIX 2: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
APPENDIX 3: EXERCISE FOR CENTRING ONESelf
APPENDIX 4: GENEVIÈVE HAAG’S ASSESSMENT SCHEME FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN
APPENDIX 5: LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE
APPENDIX 6: MUSIC THERAPY EVALUATION CHART
APPENDIX 7: IMPROVISATION TECHNIQUES IN MUSIC THERAPY
REFERENCES
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
SUBJECT INDEX
AUTHOR INDEX
This is a book about music and the human spirit. It attempts to explain how the spirit of a child may be enlivened by music. Daniel Perret is a musician who plays in dialogue with young minds and bodies to liberate them from restraint and isolation. He uses a map of the field of human energies to guide him. His task is often difficult. Finding a way forward, around barriers, may take patience. There is always a chance, however, that the music will spark the fire of life and creativity, setting a spirit free and bringing happiness. Music, being part of the source of life always changes us, in small or tremendous ways. It colours and fixes our memories. It gives narrative strength to our experiences and to the recollections of life. It enters into the body, moving and exciting, feeding vitality. In skilled and sympathetic hands, it can educate and heal.

Daniel’s interest in energy fields draws attention to the sensations of movement within hidden parts of the body, as well as to the mastery of the environment of objects and space outside. It asks us to take generous interest in unfamiliar explanations of the body as a place of life where music can find an effective echo. Our ignorance of what it is that happens to us when we are enthralled by the narratives of music should advise us to suspend disbelief and to listen to how Daniel applies his metaphors to strengthen the work he does as a music therapist.

I understand ‘musicality’ to be a product of our unique human way of acting in and sensing the world (Trevarthen 1999), of being conscious of meaning through collective ‘mimesis’ (Donald 2001). All agile creatures have to master their movements by linking inner and outer organs. They must conduct the mechanics of trunk and limbs, overcoming their mass and inertia to rise from the surface of the earth and swim, fly or run. They do so with pulses of muscular effort, estimating the future of their progression in measures of time, and tracking their displacements in a space
with its centre of reference in the body. All prospective benefits and costs of ‘animacy’, the movement of the ‘soul’, are planned in images to be lived. Each navigating organism must also hold intact and regulate the secret movements of internal organs, planning essential vitality with due regard for fatigue, pain and pleasure. All expense of mechanical energy in moving has to be sensed in accord with the physiological/chemical energy in the processes of living cells. Each self is a dynamic project incorporating many components.

When the spirit is engaged, it is the whole self who responds – identity, imagination and memories, thoughts, relationships and bodily well-being. Dynamic events that sustain and energise life are carried in the sound of body movement, for which the different dynamic properties of earth, air, metal, fire and water are like tools that we can master to celebrate experience.

The sound of music penetrates the whole of our being. It not only stirs our heavy muscled skeletons. It also resonates in our ‘heart’, exciting or pacifying. It may make us tense and scared, thrill us or carry us to peace and rest. It may lift us from the present bringing to mind remote places or persons, reconstructing events. The spirit that answers to music is in the activity of both soma and viscera. It changes both the substance and quality of experience by engaging with the motives that regulate our life.

Musical art is the sound of the body moving made ‘special’ as a message (Dissanayake 1999). In any piece of music, however composed or played, we hear light stepping feet, heavy swaying hips, gestures with graceful arms and nimble fingers, their rhythms syncopated. We hear hitting, stroking and plucking of objects with affecting resonance and timbre. Music also projects voice sounds from inside the body, carrying signs of the visceral joy of affection, of calm pleasure, of painful tension and of violent anger. It describes all the levels of the body’s movement — the pulse of stepping feet that run, walk, trip and dance, mastering the earth; the rhythmic swing of hips and belly that glide and sway with dignity, light grace or flirtatious impudence. It can stimulate enfeebling pain of anxiety in the belly or the burning ardour of the breast and the alert intelligence of the head and eyes and lips, those parts that can break free with a versatility of invention that leaves the heavy limbs behind, telling metaphors for imagined worlds and activities in other times and places, abstracting symbols and putting them into words.
Music reports the endless variations of gesture that flow from shoulders to agile fingers, setting the two hands complementary tasks in the narrative of sound. By fingering responsive instruments a musician imitates the speed and intricate sequences of speech in a realm of expression that leaves the heavy body behind, describing thoughts, memories and dreams that can take place anywhere at any time – in the intellect of the head. But no thoughts are free of the vital embodied rule of emotion. Even the most artificial symbolic code carries emotive associations in its metaphors, old memories that can inspire or breed confusion and despair.

Musical art can also project the vitality of the human body empathically onto events in the animate and inanimate non-human world. It can imitate the actions and mood of beasts, and it can create illusions of space, of objects in motion and of climatic storms or oceans of sunny serenity. We animate from the spirit everything we conceive, and our art takes on the forms of energy in all experience.

Of course I am drawing parallels with Daniel’s five elements, with the different dynamic properties of earth, air, fire and water. I recognise the power of these ancient metaphors, but prefer to take them back to the life of the body. I see that the diagram of energy fields and the seven centres portrays a sexless, angel-like body of a lone person, eyes and mouth closed, with arms held down in a diagram of inactivity. I want the musical energy to be seen as a body that dances and sings by moving all its parts, rising in the space of imagination and companionship, making melodies of expression that invite engagement and offer energy or rest. I repeat, music is the sound of the body moving, even when it portrays a centred calm that makes us still.

Daniel mentions the brain and the new science of emotions in cognition. We are all watching to see what new inventions can teach us about what goes on in our heads when we think and feel and intend to move in different ways, and when we respond to one another (Adolphs 2003; Decety and Chaminade 2003). Science makes slow progress towards a richer awareness of motivation – the values of the spirit that enliven the body and mind. It finds checks and balances of motive at many levels, conscious and unconscious, that economise and expend the energy of life.

Cognitive brain science has difficulty grappling with the visceral economy that rules at a subconscious level, that determines our sense of
well-being or distress, of vigour or fatigue and that communicates apprehensive emotions that anticipate joy or fears suffering in our social relationships (Panksepp 2000). What we do know tells us that the expressive intelligence of interest signalled by the eyes and the way the lips and voice convey changing pleasure and displeasure in interpersonal life, giving moral values to relationships and to our selves have evolved from systems that regulate breath, the flow of the blood and feeding and digestion. Excitements and feelings of well-being or ill health are manifestations of control for the metabolism of life – for the vital energy economy of tissues and organs hidden within us. This understanding helps explain why music can so deeply affect our sense of vitality and health, and how it can be used in therapy (Trevarthen and Malloch 2000; Panksepp and Bernatzky 2002).

The fact that consciousness is different in the left and right hemispheres of the brain is puzzling and fascinating, and it is certainly important for understanding emotional pathology (Schore 2003). The cerebral hemispheres seem like brother and sister in consciousness and emotion, with subtly different intelligences and personalities, and the right is perhaps more emotional, musical and feminine, and it develops more quickly before language is acquired. There are, however, many paradoxes.

The story neuropsychology tells is surely a very provisional one. For example, a left-handed female child is likely to speak early and may be a willing and able singer. Left-handed males rarely have these talents, but they may have special visuo-spatial interests. Where does this leave the idea that the left hemisphere is male and the right female? I think that the evidence is that the cognitive and ‘executive’ (thought organising) differences found by psychologists with their intelligence tests in left and right sides of the cerebral cortex reflect a deeper, and more ancient, left–right asymmetry of motives. These motives either command the body to act boldly on the world with intricate goal-directed motor sequences, chancing that there will be enough energy, or seek to conserve resources of the self and its body by holding a wider view of circumstances, and by sympathetic response to other sensitive selves.

All the evidence available points to an intricate and variable complementarity between patches of tissue in different lobes of the cortex, all of which are but foliage of different colours on the canopy of a
forest of neural systems whose roots are far below, often out of reach of functional brain imaging. Moreover, the brain’s processing of the information by which actions are planned and guided is so fast that our recording tools can rarely catch more than a blur of what is happening. I judge that brain science is far from leading to the explanation of natural musicality. I doubt if it offers much to explain the work of Daniel as a music therapist. In this he and I tend to agree.

Perhaps the most remarkable discovery of psychological research into the origins of human nature in recent time is that an infant is born not only sensitive to the musicality of another person’s expressions, but capable of moving with the music of movements, imitating and questioning the melody, sympathetic for the energy in it (Trehub 1999; Trevarthen and Malloch 2002). Babies are alert to the pulse, quality and narrative of a mother’s talk and song (Malloch 1999). They appreciate beauty in musical sound and move in time with it. They are distressed by discord or lack of ‘attunement’ in another’s expressions, sensing detachment as alienation (Stern 1999). Following the development of musicality in the games of infants and parents we see how this active celebration of enjoyment in shared activity is serious preparation for learning what others know and do. It is in the structure of the bridge between understandings of teacher and learner, and it helps the adult meet what the child is discovering as they cross this bridge together.

I value this book mainly for the evidence it brings from the author’s experience of making contact with autistic children, and from sharing their fears and hopes. The way Daniel traces the evolution of a child’s motives to meet with them and to invite a contribution to a musical game or dialogue opens up a wealth of topics which I think are of crucial importance, not only for therapy with children who are so defensive and inarticulate, but for all our understanding of the development and growth of the human spirit.

I am convinced that there are thresholds of energy that a child or a relationship may need to surmount. Indeed, any person adventuring into new experiences must encounter them. Entering a new level of expressiveness and awareness of the possibilities of life entails risk and demands concentration. It has to be planned. Readiness to move forward often comes suddenly, as a release.
We have seen that in normal development of an infant there are regressive periods followed by advances in competence and understanding. Indeed, we have described infancy as a succession of age-related Periods of Rapid Change. Most famously, there is the great transformation, which some call a ‘revolution’, that occurs around 9 months after birth when a child senses the goals of others and seeks, for the first time, to cooperate or engage with their purposes, accepting the new ideas and values involved. (Trevarthen and Aitken 2003)

This we describe as a threshold to an understanding of other’s meanings, and to catching the sense of words.

Therapists have found the account of ‘transitions’ in normal infancy of value in explaining sudden advances in interest, skill and communication observed in a client’s responses, and their active contributions to joint enjoyment of the creative task. It is like the removal of a blockage, the opening of clouds. I believe that the cause of these ‘discontinuous’ events in human achievement must be understood as products of the motivating process, the dynamic system that regulates life’s energy resources.

Actions require prediction, of the risks and potential benefits of committing the body that way. The state of the spirit determines what may be imagined with confidence – what future the self has. A traumatised child or one whose development has not created the confident awareness that meets the needs of certain tasks, will either not attain the level of anticipation that can make action possible, or will block it, protectively.

We expect a child to reach out toward us playfully, adventurously, exuberantly, affectionately, knowing we will share fun and help with difficulties. An autistic child is puzzlingly unwilling in some respects, and too focused on other private needs for us to comprehend. That is why, as with any child who has a handicap in acting and relating, a parent, therapist or teacher has to sensitively find the place ‘where the child is’, and imagine his or her world, with its gaps and fears.

As Daniel shows us, you have to ‘reach out’ and be alert for any sign of approach or an opening of the spirit for sharing play and invention. Music offered in this responsive way, is often the key that frees the child’s enjoyment and creativity. We must pay attention to Daniel’s explanations
of how he has found that key for a child and opened the door to action in sound they could enjoy together.

_Colwyn Trevarthen_

_Professor of Neurobiology, The University of Edinburgh_

**References**


Rhythm of Life (excerpt)

There are times when my focus shifts
deep er than what I am seeing,
like falling into an underlying current
behind the physical world of appearances
where everything is colour, movements, and sound
an interweaving, vibrating pulsation that flows
into birth, through life, through death.
It never stops, there’s never a break…

Marie Perret, 1999
I am fascinated both as a musician and as a music therapist by the fact that the word ‘harmony’ is a musical term as well as a word used in daily life. Very often the word is used without understanding why the same word pertains to music and to life in general.

We talk readily about harmony in a couple, in a family, in a village or in a commercial organisation. We talk about ‘living in harmony with…’. But once harmony is lost, what can we actually do to restore it? What exactly is missing? Which ingredient? Is it a particular state of mind that has vanished? Which one would that be?

Neuroscientists have observed and documented that humans are born with an innate musicality which is expressed in the very earliest exchanges with our parents. Researchers using audio and video recordings and computer analysis, have found that in the communications between parents and toddlers there are rhythms, musical bars, melody, nuances in intonation, in fact all the ingredients that make music. Even when we are babies we cannot but be musical. All our communication is coloured by the rhythms of our brain, our heart, our breathing and our digestion. Our communications dance through the expression of our emotions and feelings from the tiniest movement by the baby’s fingers, to its face, arms and legs. Even our physical anatomy, the fact of having two legs for instance, enhances our natural propensity for rhythms of two or four beats per bar, whereas the rest of the body, the independent movements of our arms, hands, head and our heartbeat, engage us naturally in polyrhythms, multiple and simultaneous rhythms. We experienced these rhythms previously in the womb, a universe mainly made up of sounds and tastes. We can call this our biological musicality.

The relatively new discipline of bioacoustics, partially inspired by Tomatis’ work in France, is trying to prove that each muscle, each organ
or part of our skeleton, produces its own sound, a frequency. This makes of us a bit of a symphony. Our *inborn musicality*, though, goes beyond this purely biological aspect. There is the memory of what we heard in our mother’s womb, her voice, her heartbeat as well as our own, the voices of other family members, the noises of her digestion, of the environment, songs or music. Most of the time there would be a feeling or emotion associated with such experiences of sound. All these sounds stem either directly from our mother or come from elsewhere outside and are filtered by her, by her body and her whole being, and include her own emotional reactions to any ‘sound’ event in the outside environment.

Of course there is also a *cultural musicality* present in the larger environment in which we have grown up. This musicality will depend on our parents’ taste in music, the presence or absence of music at school, our musical education, the music to which we have listened on the radio, on records, at concerts, on the television and at the cinema, for example. This multiple sound environment has inevitably transmitted to us a vast musical memory. Our etheric energy field may store every single piece of sensory information. For a while I worked with a boy in music therapy whose mother came from Cameroon. There was no doubt that he had been exposed to a wealth of rhythms that are not common in our western culture. These cultural transmissions would have started in the womb and would come not only from acoustic sounds but very likely would also be received through the mother’s subconscious, her etheric energy field. I know from personal experience that we can also draw on sound experiences from past lives.

Stephen Malloch, an Australian musician and scientist, talks of ‘communicative musicality’ present from the first weeks of our lives (Trevarthen and Malloch 2000). The neurobiologist Colwyn Trevarthen underlines this:

The new-born has an innate appreciation of the dynamics of emotions that inhabit the human movements and specially their expression through the voice, combined with an awareness of the evolution of the ‘emotional narrative’ – expressing the changing qualities of feelings that follow cycles or slow waves of excitement and vitality…
When a mother sings a children’s song, the baby joins in with her and participates in moving his fingers and arms, smiling happily, uttering some sounds that often anticipate and underline the end of a phrase. The rhythm that underlies any mother–baby conversation allows the child to anticipate events in the narrative. The whole becomes an intimate ‘dance’ between two participants that becomes visible when one films and compares the simultaneous expressions on their faces.

Beyond a biological musicality, an innate cultural musicality and a learned musicality which is strengthened through the rituals in our first weeks of life that bring about the first unfolding of language, there are most likely to be at least two more dimensions of musicality that I feel are sufficiently important to be taken into consideration. Both dimensions relate to energy. One is the empathetic capacity of our energy field, and more particularly of the thyroid chakra, which is linked to hearing and expression. The second is associated with what many call a universal or spiritual source. Musicality is also an expression that allows us, through the sensitivity of our thyroid chakra which surpasses our five physical senses, to follow all movements of expression on a very subtle and intimate level. This can be observed when we are listening carefully to someone speaking. In this situation we may catch ourselves, or others, moving their lips in synchronicity with the speaker. We may feel in our own bodies the movements the speaker makes with his head, his fingers or his arms, for example. Colwyn Trevarthen reports from his personal observations the same phenomenon that neuroscientists have found in one part of the brain. This brain centre allows someone to register and reproduce simultaneously the movements seen in another person.

This research documents a very sophisticated empathetic quality that allows us to identify with the other’s expression, even on a feeling level, as if we were inside his skin. This faculty allows us to develop a musicality that integrates the processes of mind together with transpersonal dimensions such as inspirations from unknown sources and to communicate them. We find ourselves face to face with the foundations of our cultural expression. These give us the means with which we may participate intimately in visions; we may express and transmit them. It enables us to elaborate concepts and to translate intuitions of feelings which spoken language cannot adequately express.