



A Season of Happiness

Focus



F18

Music for Moods and Memories

a simple melody affects us more than we may realise

There aren't too many times when we don't hear music. It is one of those aspects we have become so used to that life without it would seem rather empty. Many restaurants play a selection in the background, pleasant tunes that mask the clatter from the kitchen, but not so loud that they interfere with the small talk of clientele. Supermarkets pipe it through the store to accompany shoppers as they fill their trolleys. We listen to breakfast shows on the radio and play a CD in the car on the way to work. On occasions it can be an annoyance, especially when the same irritating tune jangles over and over through the phone earpiece while we're in a queue waiting for a connection. We increase the volume to fully appreciate our favourite melodies at the end of a hard day, then yell at the kids to turn down the racket blaring from the stereo in their rooms. Like it or not, music in our day is a fact of life.

Along with everything else, musical appreciation has evolved over the years, from classical and folk to jazz, rock, heavy metal and rap. Each type was developed to suit a specific time in history and reflected the attitude of the people who lived then. Not all would have appreciated the new, preferring the old style they were comfortable with rather than the cacophony of "modern" music. Fortunately, that didn't dissuade composers and musicians from experimenting with different sounds and arrangements to satisfy a growing population of music-hungry listeners. Add to this the technology to make recordings, and people are able to appreciate a single tune or an entire concert wherever they are and whenever they want. Music has come of age and is here to stay.

Interestingly, there is more to a piece of music than just a catchy tune and maybe a lyric. The key it is played in triggers a specific mood. A composition solely in a minor key would be sombre throughout and is likely to leave the listener feeling sad or melancholy. Major chords are bright and uplifting suggesting happiness and contentment. Use a combination in an arrangement and the different phrases almost tell a story on their own, taking the mood up and down throughout the composition. Vary the tempo, or include meaningful words in appropriate places and this reinforces the sentiment to send quite a powerful message that few could ignore. As a simple example, watch one of those feel-good movies like "Sleepless in Seattle" and notice how the background music increases both pleasure and pathos. It's not just any sound that matters. Actors speak, doors slam, there may be traffic noise in the background. These are important because they tell the actual story; but it's never quite as moving without the music soundtrack. Remember the old silent movies – no sounds at all, not from the film anyway; but there was usually a piano somewhere hammering out melodies varied to suit the changing moods of the storyline. I doubt cinemas would have been too popular if the only accompaniment to the movie was the fidgeting of the audience and someone in the next seat munching popcorn.

So, what is it about musical notes strung together in a specific order and played in differing rhythms that affect feelings and attitudes, behaviour even? A certain tune may remind us of old experiences that we are tempted to repeat just by hearing it again; but what about the first time? Take dancing for instance: which came first, the urge to jig around, or the music that stirred an inexplicable need to? We had a pet cockatoo who would dance and bob to the beat of the 1812 overture playing in the background of a TV commercial for the Army Reserves. We didn't bounce around the room when we heard it, so he wasn't mimicking us. Neither were the actors performing in time to the music, so there was no association there. And if we played the entire overture on the stereo, the only part he danced to was that same, brief musical phrase that had set him off in the first place. What about dogs which seem agitated and begin howling when they hear a few notes in a certain pitch, yet generally ignore most other music? Apparently sequences of musical notes communicate more than just a simple tune. They send messages, subliminal signals commanding both people and animals to react in a particular way.

We not only respond subconsciously to these triggers, but often employ them deliberately to stimulate us in our daily lives. Those tedious chores like ironing and cleaning are easier to tackle with the right kind of music. When she was young and while doing the weekly wash, my wife liked to play her Greek album, just one in particular. There were others in the same ethnic style, but apparently they weren't laundry music. I listen to all kinds when I'm cooking – 1930's dance bands, Beatles, Def Leppard, Mark Knopfler, sometimes classical. I'm not sure why I choose one type over another – maybe it's the mood I'm in at the time; or could it be the atmosphere I wish to create because that's the way I want to feel? I like to think the food tastes better for it – Credence Clearwater soup followed by roast beef and Bad Moon Yorkshire puddings rising!

It seems we may have been indoctrinated over time to the extent that music has become a drug we need to enhance our lives. Sometimes we actually play the sort that will induce feelings, even create a persona we wish to adopt at a particular moment. When we desire to be someone we are not, an appropriate tune can help us get into that role better than any other means. Having at long last decided to tell the boss where to stick his job, we put on Darth Vader's theme from Star Wars. The stirring rendition stimulates a sensation of power, invincibility, and is just what we need to shrug off the fetters of a subservient wimp to become a fearsome Jedi from the dark side. Even as we are entering the manager's office and can no longer hear the music ringing in our ears, it is still in our head, just as loud and supportive; maybe more so, because memories are like that. Later that day, back home and out of a job, it is probably the last thing we want to hear; but years down the track, whenever we see Star Wars we will relive every aspect of what Vader's theme meant to us so long ago – the nervous butterflies, the determination, the euphoria of winning. Music helped us do what we had to then; that same tune will remind us that we actually did it; and we will experience again a repeat of the exhilaration and personal pride.

Not all associations are as dramatic. Memories of ordinary events can be brought to mind by a tune from the past. If we heard something playing on our first date, a replay at a later time might stir good memories; maybe not-so-good if the liaison was an embarrassing disaster. When we eventually met that special person in our life, there was probably a song going round at the time that we would make our own. All kinds of occasions, from holidays to parties to changes in circumstances are likely to have been accompanied by a particular song or a musical style that later epitomised what happened back then. Even melodies which did not feature prominently in our own lives can have special meaning. Those numbers from WWII performed by Glenn Miller, Vera Lynn and the like tend to generate a certain empathy with the era. Someone who had not been born then might listen to an album in that particular style, close their eyes and be able to imagine what it was like to be saying a fond farewell to their sweetheart, hoping they would meet again when it was all over, perhaps in that same memory lane – a fantasy conjured by the magic of music.

Nostalgia of this kind is obviously borrowed – from parents and grandparents who sang songs of their times, or from old movies of the period; yet it's more than simply seeing those events on film, or learning of them through anecdotes; even reading about them doesn't quite do the trick. A book about the 1940's is unlikely to supply a reader with sufficient atmosphere to really appreciate what life was like back then; however, if they played some appropriate music in the background, it might be a different story – perhaps a better one?

What about our own lives, though, as opposed to those of people long gone? Of course we reminisce, all of us from nine to ninety. I can almost guarantee that music will feature prominently in this reflective process, and the library is constantly being upgraded. The younger generation can't seem to function without music. Fortunately for their elders, many listen to it via ear-pieces, happy to keep it strictly personal. Their play list will, in most cases, consist of the very latest tracks, new songs that reflect their age, current attitude and the mood of the time. Without even realising, they are imprinting an association in their memory, exactly the way we did when we were that age. Should something significant occur at the same time a particular tune is playing, the link is established. Hearing the melody later will refresh the experience of the moment; and if there is a need to feel that way again, an audio replay will trip the switch. I personally might dislike their kind of music, particularly when it just seems like a fearful noise;

but I wouldn't be surprised to hear it again in the future and be reminded of an incident or person I happened across when it first jangled in my ears. Then it might be less annoying, perhaps even enjoyable.

Music is all around and accompanies us throughout our lives, enhancing enjoyment, concern, sadness and light-hearted frivolity. It can also create these same moods and attitudes simply by being heard. Because it is so important to us, we listen to it when we can and buy collections of our favourites to play for relaxation or when we need comfort and support. The mere existence of music has enriched our lives, but what about after - will we be able to take it with us when we go? Maybe we won't need to. After all, Hank Joplin, Elvis and Michael Hutchence must have gone somewhere. Wouldn't it be nice to think they'll be waiting to entertain us again, but in person the next time? That would be some kind of Heaven.

PS Here's an appropriate page from our eBook A Season of Happiness:

MUSIC IS MEMORIES

"Listen - they're playing our song." Maybe you haven't used those exact words, but if music has been a part of your life at all, you may find certain tunes or artists remind you of particular events from your past. If they were happy times, replaying those old favourites can be not only nostalgic, but can also help put you in the same positive frame of mind which once made the moment so memorable for you.

RECORD YOUR FAVOURITE SONGS



Make a list of old songs which mean a lot to you, then try to get recordings of them. Play them whenever you need a psychological boost and draw on the memories they bring for comfort, strength and motivation. Also, start a current album, taping any tunes that seem to put you in a positive frame of mind.

For more sample pages, go to the extended preview of A Season of Happiness which can be found on the eBooks web page.

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