

A Q&A with Kathleen Marie Higgins, Author of “The Music Between Us”

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From our first social bonding as infants to the funeral rites that mark our passing, music plays an important role in our lives, bringing us closer to one another. In “[The Music between Us: Is Music a Universal Language?](#)” (University of Chicago Press, June 2012) Kathleen Marie Higgins investigates this role, examining the features of human perception that enable music’s uncanny ability to provoke — despite its myriad forms across continents and throughout centuries — the sense of a shared human experience. Her interdisciplinary and richly researched study showcases the ways music is used in rituals, education, work, healing, as source of security and, perhaps most importantly, joy.

Higgins, who is a philosophy professor at The University of Texas at Austin, recently answered some of our questions here at ShelfLife@Texas about the transcendent power of music – and how it is one of the most fundamental bridges in human society.

What is your musical background, and how did you become interested in the philosophy of music?

I was a music major as an undergraduate, playing piano and organ. I was especially interested in the way music related to ideas and culture more broadly, and taking a course in the music of India led me to start reflecting on the differences among musical traditions. I did graduate work in philosophy, but among my philosophical interests from the beginning was philosophy of music.

What are some modern discussions being held by philosophers who study music?

One set of issues concerns the ontology of music — questions about what constitutes music, musical performances and musical works. Another focuses on why music affects us so powerfully. Philosophers of music consider such issues as whether or not emotional arousal and/or expression is the purpose of music or whether these are simply byproducts; the basis for the connection between music and emotion; whether music that expresses given emotions also arouses these same emotions; and what the object of the emotion is in the case of emotion generated through music.

Philosophers of music also discuss the ways that music relates to ethics. Can it make us a better or worse person, and if so how? What is involved in musical understanding? For example, how much attention to structure is essential? How music is like or unlike the other arts? How music is like or unlike language? What is the proper basis for evaluating and valuing music? How and why music functions politically? And what does music reveal about our minds and our world? I'm tempted to say that music offers an angle on just about any topic in philosophy.

In the book you mention the qin, a Chinese unfretted lute, which is so sensitive that ambient air currents can produce sounds and even the grain of the musician's fingerprints on the strings can be heard. What other unique musical instruments or musical techniques have you encountered in your research about the universality of music?

Probably the most interesting I've come across is a practice in one New Guinea society of putting drone beetles in one's mouth in order to use one's own body as a resonator for the sounds of the beetles. Another New Guinea people, the Kaluli, perform duets with various natural sounds, such as those of waterfalls and cicadas. The ghatam, a South Indian instrument, is a clay pot. One of the things I notice when I encounter instruments and techniques such as these is the tendency to find musical possibilities in materials and phenomena in everyday life.

I'm often struck by the various timbres utilized in music, whether produced by instruments or the musical voice. The first time I heard a crumhorn, I found the character of the sound rather humorous, even though the crumhorn was not designed for that purpose. I also find highly nasal vocal styles a bit comical, but in some cultures they are standard and highly prized. My reactions in these two cases makes it clear to me how much the musical practices of our own society determine what we take to be the norm, and how sounds that aren't utilized (or utilized much) in those practice can strike us as aberrant.

In my opinion, one of the most interesting chapters in your book is "What's Involved in Sounding Human?" At the risk of being reductive, can you explain some of the research you included in the chapter to answer the question, "What is it to sound human?"

The question itself suggests that human beings employ only a subset of the available sonic possibilities in music, and this is certainly the case. Not surprisingly, we make music in the area where the human powers of hearing are most acute. The octave above a note is treated as the "same" note in most respects. Human beings prefer intervals of relatively simple ratios of

frequency vibrations, and the simplest (the octave and the fifth, in particular) tend to be prominent in most musical systems around the world.

Human beings typically make music in "pieces." We tend to use a centering tone (called the tonic in the West), which is perceived as the tone of a scale that is the most stable, and other tones have various degrees of relative instability by comparison. Music tends to employ lots of repetition within a piece and within smaller components of a piece. There is some tendency in most musical cultures for musical utterances to end with a descent in pitch. All these tendencies show up virtually everywhere that people make music. Human beings have a signature way of making music, just as songbirds and humpback whales do.

What do you find most fascinating about the connecting power of music?

What interests me most about all this is the fact that even though music from another culture might be formulated on very different principles than the music we are most familiar with, and even though it might sound exceedingly foreign, it is geared to our perceptual faculties and is structured of patterns that can be recognized quite readily if one is familiar with the musical idiom. This is not to say that it is easy to "get" foreign music right away; some of our perceptual habits may even interfere, as when we are expecting one kind of tuning or rhythmic organization and encounter another. But it does suggest, and some experimental evidence bears this out, that we can improve in gaining an orientation in foreign music in a relatively short time. So we shouldn't conclude from the fact that it is challenging that an unfamiliar type of music is foreclosed to us. The popular claim that music can communicate across cultural boundaries may understate the challenges in some cases, but the basic idea is right.

Are there any non-musical societies that we know of? Or are there societies scholars consider decidedly less musical than others?

No, it appears that music plays a role in every human society, and that it serves a cluster of functions (creation of social cohesion, emotional regulation, indication of socially significant occasions and promoting health, for example) virtually everywhere.

What's next for you and philosophy?

I've been working on issues in the philosophy of emotions, in particular on the nature of grief. I'm interested in how grief motivates and is expressed through art and other practices that have an aesthetic dimension. Music plays an important role in this connection; lamentation is one of those ubiquitous ways that we humans use music. So although this new project isn't about music as such, music will be a part of it, and no doubt other projects I pursue in the future.

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