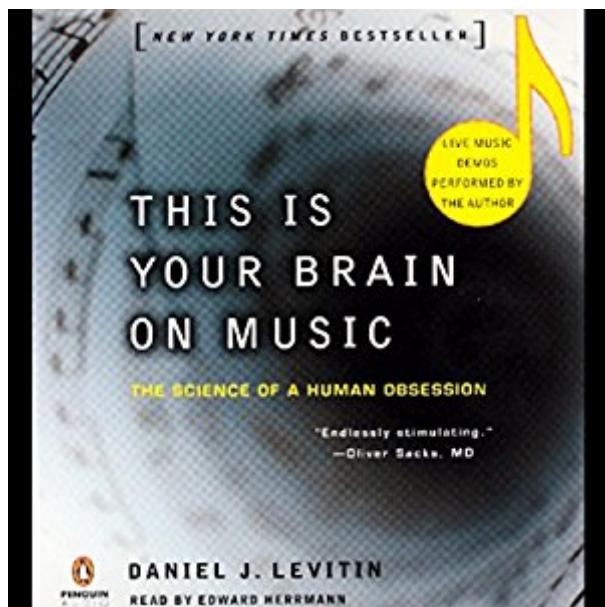


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This Is Your Brain On Music: The Science Of A Human Obsession



Synopsis

What can music teach us about the brain? What can the brain teach us about music? And what can both teach us about ourselves? In this groundbreaking union of art and science, rocker-turned-neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin (The World in Six Songs and The Organized Mind) explores the connection between music - its performance, its composition, how we listen to it, why we enjoy it - and the human brain. Drawing on the latest research and on musical examples ranging from Mozart to Duke Ellington to Van Halen, Levitin reveals: How composers produce some of the most pleasurable effects of listening to music by exploiting the way our brains make sense of the world. Why we are so emotionally attached to the music we listened to as teenagers, whether it was Fleetwood Mac, U2, or Dr. Dre. That practice, rather than talent, is the driving force behind musical expertise. How those insidious little jingles (called earworms) get stuck in our head. Taking on prominent thinkers who argue that music is nothing more than an evolutionary accident, Levitin poses that music is fundamental to our species, perhaps even more so than language. A Los Angeles Times Book Award finalist, This Is Your Brain on Music will attract readers of Oliver Sacks and David Byrne, as it is an unprecedented, eye-opening investigation into an obsession at the heart of human nature. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There are questions that are too big for science; are there gods, for instance, or what is love? And maybe we will never fully find out scientifically why music does what it does and why we care about it so. But for many reasons, music ought to be a profitable subject for scientific enquiry. It is, as

Pythagoras knew, an activity strongly rooted in mathematics, and the physics of music is fairly well understood. It is as universal as language; all human cultures have some sort of music, indicating it does something indispensable. And we are increasingly able to figure out, with our sophisticated brain imaging gadgets, what brains do when they hear or think about music. The neuroscience of music is the area of expertise of Daniel J. Levitin, and he writes of it in *_This Is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession_* (Dutton), a fascinating account of current music psychology. Levitin has produced a book wonderfully accessible to lay readers, since although he is an academic (he runs the Laboratory for Musical Perception, Cognition, and Expertise at McGill University), before he became a scientist, he had been a performing musician, sound engineer, and record producer, working with names like Steely Dan and Blue Oyster Cult. He does pull examples from Bach and Beethoven, but he is obviously more comfortable citing universally-known tunes like "Happy Birthday to You", "Somewhere Over the Rainbow", or "Stairway to Heaven". (Readers whose tastes range in previous epochs will possibly be surprised at the sophistication modern popular musicians have displayed.) Levitin has a good sense of humor and is a genial explainer. He starts out with a forty page first chapter "What is Music?

I'm a musician who's been thinking about reading this book since seeing it favorably reviewed. I read it after receiving it as a gift this Christmas, and unfortunately found it to read like an extended Wikipedia entry. Opinions and speculation are stated as facts, claims are not justified with evidence, the author frequently oversteps his expertise, and the writing is otherwise amateurish, lacking direction and leaving loose ends. It seems as though the author wrote it off the top of his head without researching his points or his examples, and a number of statements are false. Other reviewers have listed their pet gripes (some of which have been fixed in the paperback copy), here are a few of mine that haven't been mentioned (and that still exist in the paperback):-The detailed discussion of the Haydn's Surprise Symphony theme (p92-93) is flawed at every turn: He uses the term parallelism (a term reserved for describing a particular harmonic device) incorrectly to refer to the melody. He describes the melody as going up "just a little" when what we have at that point is the *largest interval leap* anywhere in the theme. Then, "the highest note we've encountered so far" in the melody is incorrectly identified as the fifth. We have already (just two notes ago) heard the C above the G he is referring to. (The highest note is the tonic, not the fifth). Finally, the "surprise" in the Surprise symphony, is identified in the wrong place--eight measures too soon. Why so much detail about something the author hasn't researched? Not only that, but the misunderstandings lead him to bad analysis.

The first thing is that this is a book expressing ideas about how the human mind processes music and how the brain is involved with that processing (not HOW the brain processes it, which no one knows), rather than a book on music. While I am not obsessed by the topic, I find the exploration of the mind and brain function fascinating. My interest was piqued when my father was taken by a brain tumor and I tried to find material on the subject. I read "Phantoms in the Brain" by V. S. Ramachandran and then some articles by others in the field who claimed the mind is simply an illusion created by brain function, that our sense of consciousness and choosing is simply false. This has always seemed wrong to me, no matter how much of our brain function occurs without our "mind" or "consciousness" being involved in any way. Being a pianist, it has seemed to me that there is no biological necessity to play Chopin. And when I sit down at the piano, I choose what to play, how to play it, and whether to learn the piece in the first place. I was amused when I read articles by Pinker and others struggling in trying to come to terms with some evolutionary reason for music. Some simply dismiss it (I think because it is so inconvenient to their models), others try and find it a way to attract mates (as this author does), others find it an accidental use of some other evolutionarily advantageous trait even though they can't quite identify what it is or was. So, I was glad to read this book because of my interest in the brain and mind along with my passion for music. It is indeed a very interesting book that I could not put down. Daniel Levitin is a scientist whose work involves trying to understand how the mind perceives music and how that maps into the brain.

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