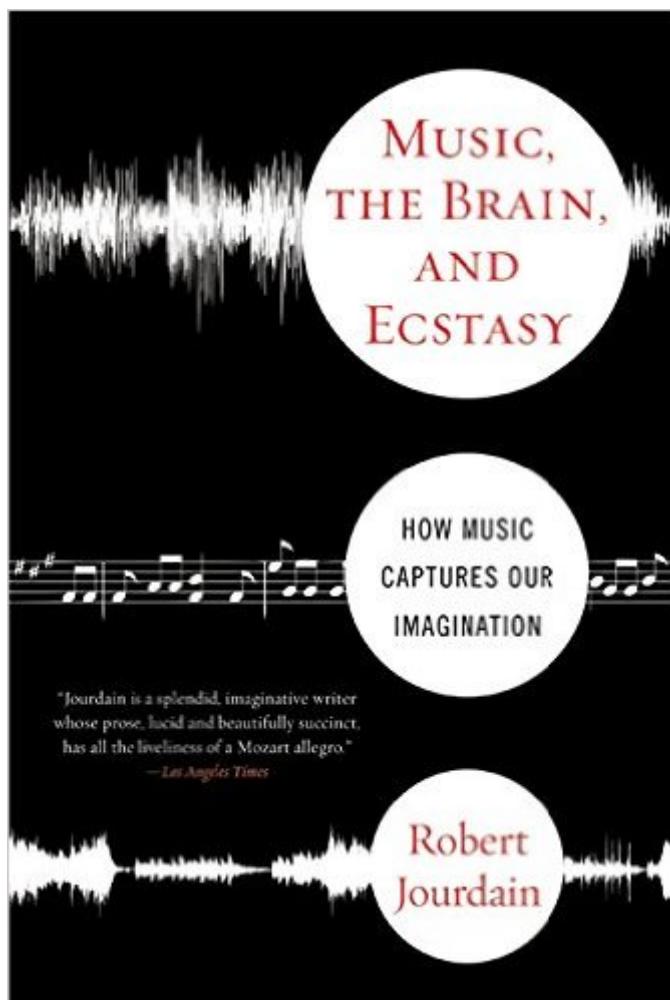


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Music, The Brain, And Ecstasy: How Music Captures Our Imagination



Synopsis

What makes a distant oboe's wail beautiful? Why do some kinds of music lift us to ecstasy, but not others? How can music make sense to an ear and brain evolved for detecting the approaching lion or tracking the unsuspecting gazelle? Lyrically interweaving discoveries from science, psychology, music theory, paleontology, and philosophy, Robert Jourdian brilliantly examines why music speaks to us in ways that words cannot, and why we form such powerful connections to it. In clear, understandable language, Jourdian expertly guides the reader through a continuum of musical experience: sound, tone, melody, harmony, rhythm, composition, performance, listening, understanding--and finally to ecstasy. Along the way, a fascinating cast of characters brings Jourdian's narrative to vivid life: "idiots savants" who absorb whole pieces on a single hearing, composers who hallucinate entire compositions, a psychic who claims to take dictation from long-dead composers, and victims of brain damage who can move only when they hear music. Here is a book that will entertain, inform, and stimulate everyone who loves music--and make them think about their favorite song in startling new ways.

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Customer Reviews

As a new student of music I was filled with questions. Why exactly did we humans (unlike animals) evolve to appreciate music? What survival benefit could it have provided? And how exactly does music give us pleasure? What is really going on in the body when a great piece of music touches our inner soul to the point of giving us goose bumps? Unfortunately I found teachers and peers not only devoid of answers to such questions, but completely unreceptive to them. Many people are even hostile towards such questions. I felt surrounded by automatons content only with pushing levers and petals on their instruments, completely disinterested in the exact nature of what they were doing. I find such people devoid of one of the most important instincts that supposedly separates us from the animal kingdom, high curiosity. Robert Jourdain's book, *Music, the Brain and Ecstasy*, was exactly what I needed to read. He explains how the origin of music appreciation in humans is a consequence of the evolution of speech to improve social interaction, which has survival advantage. He explains how pleasure in music is a consequence of a series of deviations from a tonal center (usually the tonic note or triad of the key in which the music is composed), which introduces conflict in the brain, followed by a return to the tonal center, which provides satisfactory resolution. He explains how such conflict and resolution can be composed into four different aspects of music: rhythm, melody, phrase, and harmony. Ecstasy is achieved when resolution is provided after a conflict has reached the limit in tonal space and time of the listener's comprehension ability. Throughout the book he supports his presentation with real, physical phenomena within the body, mostly within the brain.

Why does music us so deeply? In *Music, the Brain, and Ecstasy: How Music Captures our Imaginations*, Robert Jourdain explores how music enables people "to attain a greater grasp of the world (or at least a small part of it), rising from the ground to look down upon the confining maze of ordinary existence." (p. 331) Most of us experience this transcendence while listening to music at

some time in our lives and we are fascinated to learn that it is a universal, human experience. Jourdain makes a complex subject comprehensible to lay persons. In the early chapters of his book, he lays the groundwork for his discussion of music in the middle chapters. In the first chapter, he draws on biology, physiology, and neuroscience to tell us how our ears and our brains evolved and how they work. Here's his version of how we hear. "Music slams into an eardrum at the end of the ear canal and abruptly changes costume. Until this point it has traveled as a press! ure wave through air; now it proceeds as mechanical motion. Just beyond is the air-filled middle ear, where three odd-shaped bones, the ossicles, are strung from ligaments so that the eardrum pushes against the first (the malleus, or "hammer"), which yanks at the second (the incus, or "anvil"), which shoves the third (the stapes, or "stirrup") into an opening to the fluid-filled inner ear where neurons (nerve cells) await. Just like the air molecules that have transported music to the eardrum, these minuscule bones vibrate in a complex pattern that at any instant embodies every frequency contained in every note." (p. 8) In the second chapter, Jourdain draws on physics to explain how sound becomes musical tone.

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